

2022

# Accurate Data: Using Young Adult Science Fiction to Explore the Impacts of Compulsory Sexuality on Young Ace Lives

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/19840>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/535>

University of Plymouth

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
PLYMOUTH**

***ACCURATE DATA: USING YOUNG ADULT SCIENCE FICTION TO  
EXPLORE THE IMPACTS OF COMPULSORY SEXUALITY ON YOUNG AGE  
LIVES.***

by

**NATASHA KNIGHT**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

Creative Writing

School of Society and Culture

November 2022

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my supervisors, Professor Angela Smith and Dr Rachel Christofides, and to my family and friends for their support during this project.

**Signed Author's Declaration:**

At no time during the registration for the degree of *Master of Philosophy* has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee. Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment. This study was financed by the student.

Word count of main body of thesis: 44,988

Signed: ..........

Date: 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022

***Accurate Data: Using Young Adult Science Fiction to Explore the Impacts of Compulsory Sexuality on Young Ace Lives.***

**Natasha Knight.**

**Abstract**

This thesis uses Young Adult science fiction to explore regulatory systems of compulsory sexuality, and the ways in which the resulting societal norms and values impact the lives and experiences of young ace individuals. Most prior asexuality studies research is sociological, while that in the humanities has been confined to the representation and exploration of asexuality, or the re-examination of literature through an ace lens. Instead, I analyse how recent ace YA texts have engaged with compulsory sexuality and its impacts, then use my YA SF novella, *Accurate Data*, to offer a unique exploration of these issues and to envision the concept of a society without compulsory sexuality and its potential impacts on young ace lives.

*Accurate Data* features the perspectives of four ace-spectrum protagonists aged twelve to seventeen, and explores their varied experiences of being ace within three imagined future societies: one with entrenched compulsory sexuality, one allonormative, and one aronormative. I examine various impacts that compulsory sexuality has on these protagonists, demonstrate the value of non-romantic relationships with an exploration of ace notions of intimacy, and establish small- and large-scale ace communities which offer refuge from compulsory sexuality and contest its monopoly. An accompanying critical essay begins by reviewing prior research of asexuality and compulsory sexuality, questioning the lack of critical attention to these concepts. I offer a consideration of non-normative ace intimate relationships, explored in *Accurate Data*, and specifically address the absence of research into young ace

individuals' experiences of compulsory sexuality. Alongside an analysis of key ace YA texts *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020) and the 'Sal and Gabi' duology by Carlos Hernandez (2019, 2020), I then detail my use of the features of YA fiction to explore ace teenagers' experiences of compulsory sexuality in *Accurate Data*. This includes a discussion of parallels between coming out and the YA coming of age narrative, the use of multiple perspectives to reflect the diversity of ace experiences, engagement with a number of impacts of compulsory sexuality on ace lives, and the portrayal of an aromantic ace intimate relationship. Lastly, the essay examines the unique opportunities provided by SF's limitless creative possibilities to explore compulsory sexuality, allonormativity, and even aronormativity, while also using a non-sapient robot character to highlight the issue of dehumanisation of asexuality in SF, and considering the value of labels to ace individuals in combatting hermeneutical injustice and the denial of epistemic authority. Through its breadth of ace diversity, consideration of compulsory sexuality, and refutation of allonormative narratives, this thesis therefore exposes, interrogates, challenges and resists compulsory sexuality and presents experiences of asexuality in original and innovative ways.

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## Glossary

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Ace              | Referring to an identity or identities within the ace spectrum, or as shorthand for the identity 'asexual'  |
| Acephobia        | Prejudice against ace people, comparable to homophobia or biphobia  |
| Ace-spectrum     | Part of the ace spectrum of non-allosexual and/or alloromantic identities, but not necessarily aligned with a specific identity   |
| Allonormativity  | Where allosexuality and sexual relationships are the norm   |
| Alloromantic     | One who experiences romantic attraction and/or desires romantic relationships   |
| Allosexual       | One who experiences sexual attraction and/or desires sexual relationships   |
| Amatonormativity | Where alloromanticism and romantic relationships are the norm   |
| Aro ace          | Shorthand for one who is aromantic and asexual  |
| Aromantic        | One who does not experience romantic attraction and/or desire romantic relationships  |
| Asexual          | One who does not experience sexual attraction and/or desire sexual relationships  |
| Demisexual       | One who only experiences sexual attraction after forming a close bond with the object of that attraction, and/or only desires sexual relationships after forming a close bond with that partner |
| Grey-asexual     | One who identifies as being somewhere in between asexual and allosexual, and/or rarely desires sexual relationships   |
| Heteroromantic   | One who experiences romantic attraction only to people of a different gender  |

**Accurate Data, Natasha Knight, presented as the creative practice element of**  
***Accurate Data: Using Young Adult Science Fiction to Explore the Impacts of***  
**Compulsory Sexuality on Young Ace Lives.**

**Accurate Data**

**By**

**Natasha Knight**

2022

## Prologue

The robot designated 7729FL7K rolled into the dusty marketplace with a purpose.

7729FL7K always had a purpose. It was in its programming.

Its purpose at 09:28:04 Yereen Standard Time was to enter the market, make a record of any new local notices, and return to its owner at the electronic motorcycle shop. 7729FL7K was given this purpose every morning at approximately 09:07:46 YST, except on every fourteenth morning, when its owner took a day off. On these days, 7729FL7K had no purpose and remained in standby mode.

In the centre of the marketplace stood an obelisk of scuffed green chrome, many shades darker than the matte lime carapace of 7729FL7K. It, too, had a purpose. The inhabitants of Liberty, the largest settlement on the planet Yereen, used it as a noticeboard. The probability of this being the obelisk's original purpose was low: 7729FL7K had once extrapolated this conclusion from data that most things on Yereen had uses beyond their original purposes. 7729FL7K was an exception to this rule. 7729FL7K was an inventory robot, and it was here to take an inventory.

The market was crowded. 7729FL7K extended its telescopic neck to make itself bigger. This was part of its health and safety protocol, to prevent people from tripping over it.

"Excuse me," 7729FL7K said. The words came from a speaker resembling a smiling mouth on its cuboid sensor unit, in a default tone that humans thought was cheerful. "Excuse me, please."

It trundled its way to the obelisk without its caterpillar treads injuring any toes. Whirring eye-like cameras set into its sensor unit scanned the notices, capturing and transforming image and text into binary data. It was programmed to highlight any data

that its owner would find particularly interesting. 7729FL7K had no concept of interesting, so it worked on hypotheses formed from past reactions and requests.

A stolen bicycle—do not highlight.

Karate lessons—do not highlight.

Special offer on solar batteries—highlight.

This was 7729FL7K's purpose: to catalogue information and provide it to humans who requested it. This was 7729FL7K's programming, instilled in its circuits by its manufacturer. 7729FL7K always followed its programming.

7729FL7K completed its scan of another notice: an official proclamation from the Federal authorities, concerning the trial of a local woman for aiding drug traffickers.

“Error,” it said happily. “There is an error.”

None of the humans in the vicinity reacted to 7729FL7K's internal distress. There was an error. The data 7729FL7K was receiving from the notice did not match older data stored in its memory banks. The notice stated that the defendant—Nefeli Odessa, 42, medic—had committed a Federal crime at 23:31 YST on the tenth day of the first month of that standard year, in an alleyway near the crèche. At 23:31 on that precise date, 7729FL7K had also been in that alleyway, because it was at the back of its owner's shop. 7729FL7K had witnessed Nefeli Odessa meeting another person in that alleyway, its sensors documenting everything. Its original owner had programmed it with comprehensive legal knowledge, and no crime had been committed.

7729FL7K was an inventory robot. At the root of its code lay one basic command: all data must be accurate. Facts must replace falsehoods. Errors must be corrected.

This command overruled all others. The command to collect data and return to its owner could be fulfilled only after the error was corrected. 7729FL7K knew what it must do.

7729FL7K left the market and travelled slowly down the road to the courthouse. Like most buildings in Liberty, it was low, tan in colour, and built from reinforced mud. Embedded in the wall beside the entrance was a row of data ports. 7729FL7K parked itself next to a stocky lifting robot and extended the retractable limb on the left side of the processing unit that formed its body. It plugged one of the three fingers on that hand into a data port, searching public census records for Nefeli Odessa.

Success: Nefeli Odessa had a wife, Estelle, listed as proprietor of a bar. Estelle Odessa would be able to assist 7729FL7K in fulfilling its primary command. 7729FL7K knew every law and legal doctrine. It needed to go to the trial, stand as a witness, and correct the error. All data must be accurate.

7729FL7K unplugged itself, retracted the hose of its arm, and set off for the bar.

This was its programming. This was its purpose.

## Chapter One

Seventeen bottles of Wolfspaw stood on the shelf, one fewer than on the stocklist. Melina counted them again, but the missing drink hadn't simply fallen down behind the others. Either Estelle's list was wrong, or somebody had broken in and stolen a cheap bottle of a fizzy concoction so bitter with herbs that only someone from the southern desert would want to drink it.

Everything else was in order. Melina might not be good at bartending, but she knew how to run a tight ship. With luck, a year or two from now that would be an actual ship, rather than her mother's tiny bar.

In fairness, the place was a world away from the dirty hole Estelle had won in a card game when Melina was five. The old faux-wood counter bisecting the empty bar gleamed, and Estelle had painted a huge mural across the far wall, a green serpentine dragon chasing savannah wolves beneath all of Melina's favourite constellations. Nightly live music from the miniature corner stage gave it life, and the bar even turned a profit.

Melina checked that the shutters of the takeaway counter were secure and decided to give up on the errant bottle of soda. It surely wouldn't be that ridiculous if Estelle had made a rare error on the stocktake in her rush to catch the starferry. Denis the barman would be arriving in a few hours to open up. The stocktake done, Melina had nothing better to do until then than hide in the stockroom with a flight manual, and hope that her cousin Reiko would leave her alone.

She picked up her microtab from the counter and stepped through the hanging clay-glass beads into the stockroom. Sunlight came through the open back door, illuminating crates full of bottles and snacks. Reiko lay sprawled on the battered sofa, a bottle in one hand, an expanded microtab playing a music video in the other. She was

the price to pay for staying behind while the rest of the Odessa clan decamped to the planet Stilbon, the federal capital of the Liber System, for Nefeli's trial.

If someone had told Melina that one of her parents would come to be faced with several years' internment for a Federal crime, she'd never have guessed it would be Nefeli, the medic paid in the currency of kindness. Evidently that kindness extended to drug smugglers. Scum. Any pilot's worst enemy. Melina's worst enemy, which Nefeli had known when she'd decided to help them out. So, no: Melina had had no desire to travel halfway across the System on a grimy public ferry, all to sit in some pompous courtroom and watch her mother be sent down for aiding the sort of people who got good pilots killed in space, or worse, stripped of their licences. When the Feds had come to take Nefeli away, Melina hadn't been able to watch. Not because it was horrible, but because she couldn't look at her mother, knowing all of that.

Convincing Estelle to let her stay on Yereen hadn't been easy. Fortunately, Nefeli's brother wanted to attend the trial, so someone had to stay and babysit his daughter.

Melina moved a box of imported confectionary off a no-longer-folding metal chair and sat down, flinging her feet onto an upturned crate and crossing her ankles. She expanded her microtab so that the screen became palm-sized and brought up a flight manual.

"What are you doing?" Reiko asked.

Melina didn't bother looking up. "Studying."

She heard Reiko's expression of disgust, followed by noisy slurping. That made her look up. Reiko had a maize-paper straw between her teeth, leading to...

"Did you take that bottle of Wolfspaw from the bar?"

A shrug of skinny shoulders. “Maybe,” Reiko said. Big brown eyes blinked innocently. “Auntie Estelle said I could have whatever I wanted.”

True. She had.

“In future, tell me if you’ve taken something,” Melina said, “otherwise the stocktake comes out wrong.”

Reiko wrinkled her nose. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” Melina said, returning her attention to her flight manual. Inspiration struck. “You know,” she continued, “stuff like that is really important for pilots. Fuel, cargo, provisions—your inventory has to match what’s written in the log.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Then you’re probably screwed,” Melina said simply.

Why Reiko had decided that she wanted to be a pilot, Melina had no idea. She hated rules, and record keeping, and—crucially—being indoors. Pilots didn’t go outside much. Outside tended to be ever so slightly lethal. Someone was going to have to explain that to Reiko, and soon, but it wouldn’t be Melina. She liked the kid too much to be the one to drizzle on her dreams.

Speaking of being indoors: Reiko had her poncho on.

“Take that off,” Melina said. “You’re not going out.”

“Why not?” Reiko argued, rising off the sofa. “Did the Feds come up with some stupid law that means I have to stay inside? This isn’t Stilbon. I’m only going to walk up to the market.”

Melina put down her microtab and folded her arms behind her head. Reiko’s pale fingers clutched the hem of her vibrant green poncho, as though she expected Melina to come over and yank it off her.

“Just take it off, Reiko.”

Reiko scowled and pushed her short dark hair off her face. “You can’t stop me.”

Melina scuffed the heel of her right boot against the crate. “You’re Nefeli Odessa’s niece,” she explained. “If you go up to the market, everybody’s going to want to talk to you. They’ll want to know why you didn’t go with everyone to Stilbon. Why they left you behind. Whether you think she did it, how many years you think she’ll get.” She looked Reiko in the eye. “If you want to deal with that, go for it. Have fun.”

They stared each other down.

Reiko was the one to crack. She huffed, kicked off her woven flip-flops, and curled up on the sofa with her back to Melina.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Melina said under her breath.

Noise from the direction of the bar distracted Melina from Reiko’s response—lucky for Reiko, as Melina drew the line at being sworn at by a twelve year old.

The noise was knocking. Melina didn’t move. A disgruntled customer would yell, a thief would break in. Anyone welcome would come to the back door. Nothing good could come of a knock at the front door of a closed bar on a workday, especially knocking in a Stilboni pattern—they liked things in sixes. It was probably a Fed.

“Are you going to get that?” Reiko asked, muffled by saggy cushions.

“No.”

“Fine. I will.”

Before Melina could comprehend Reiko’s stupidity and stop her, she was gone, the strings of blue and green beads swinging behind her in the doorway. Melina quickly got up and followed her into the bar; but not quickly enough.

“Good morning,” Reiko said sunnily, standing next to the open front door.

A little green robot stood on the porch, beneath the fluttering sun-bleached awning. With its telescopic neck fully extended, its head nearly reached the level of

Reiko's shoulder. "Good morning," it replied, in a tone that made Reiko sound depressed. "This inventory robot is designated 7729FL7K. I am looking for Estelle Odessa. I must make contact with a close connection of Nefeli Odessa."

Wonderful: a robot. Displeased, Melina emerged from the shadows where she had been lurking. "She's not here. What do you want?"

The robot's head swivelled on its ball joint, pointing its dual eye-like cameras at her. "You are Melina Odessa, daughter of Nefeli and Estelle Odessa." Robots occupied a loophole in the law against facial recognition. It probably got her picture from her pilot's licence. "Hello, I am inventory robot designated 7729FL7K."

"You said." Melina pushed Reiko behind her and put her arm across the doorway. "What do you want?"

Its head spun a full three-sixty, as if it was checking for eavesdroppers. "I have important information concerning Nefeli Odessa. The data does not match. It must be made accurate."

The meaning of that was lost on Melina, which didn't surprise her. Robots were useless, expensive fads, mostly popular on Stilbon. The commercials were full of yellow-clad Stilboni office workers admiring their manicures and spouting philosophy, leaving the robots to bumble through all the little tasks that made life interesting. Melina couldn't see the appeal, or the sense.

"Please come in, 7729FL7K," Reiko said sweetly. Some people also thought that robots were cute. Unfortunately for Melina, Reiko was one of them.

The robot was inside before Melina could protest. "Thank you, unknown person."

Melina peered up and down the street. It looked deserted. She started to check for nosy gossips, then realised nowhere was ever safe from nosy gossips, and that

checking for them was highly suspicious. Hastily she retreated, shutting the front door and dragging the bolt across. She'd let the robot say its piece, then turf it out the back door.

Reiko had perched on the edge of the low, triangular stage. Melina hovered by the counter and gestured to the robot on the permanently sticky dancefloor.

"Hello, Melina Odessa and Reiko Tanaka," it said. So, Reiko had introduced herself. "I am inventory—"

"Get to the point," Melina interrupted.

"Which point?" the robot inquired.

This, Melina knew, was why navigational robots had never caught on. No pilot had time for this. "The final point," she said, aware that otherwise, they'd be there all bloody day.

The robot paused, possibly computing. "This unit must stand as a witness at the trial of Nefeli Odessa and correct the record. Then the data will be accurate."

Melina held up a hand. "Woah, hold on. Go back. What do you mean, you want to stand as a witness?" The trial was in just over a day.

The robot's cameras focused on her. "I must stand as a witness. The data must be accurate."

"Explain."

"The data must be accurate," the robot repeated. "That is my core programming. Nefeli Odessa is to be tried for a crime. The probability of a guilty verdict is ninety-nine-point-two-three-recurring percent, extrapolated from previous trial data. This verdict will be inaccurate and must be corrected."

Melina took a careful breath. Somebody was playing a very sick joke. A sick joke that Kaleb would find out about, inevitably making that somebody very sorry. But, then again...

Reiko seized on Melina's moment of distraction. "Inaccurate?" She leaned forward, knees nudging her ears. "So, she's innocent? I knew it. I *knew* it." She pointed accusatorially at Melina. "I told you she didn't help them."

Then again, Melina thought, acid churning in her stomach: robots couldn't lie.

"This unit witnessed the alleged incident," the robot said. "I have audio and visual recordings. No crime was committed."

"We have an AV port!" Reiko slipped from the stage and crawled to the wall, pulling the cracked plastic cover off the port.

The robot trundled over, extending the metal hose of its arm and plugging one of its fingers into the port. "I will replay the incident."

The dark wallscreen beside the stage, sometimes used for karaoke, immediately showed an alleyway filled with motorcycles. The camera panned across, and Melina realised that this little robot had been moonlighting as a security guard: that alley ran between the crèche and a motorcycle shop owned by a Stilboni exile.

Footsteps, loud over the bar's speakers. On the screen, a man entered the alley from the direction of the spaceport. Short, painfully thin, hooded—Samson, the drug smuggler. Then, from the south, came Melina's mother. The two met in the middle as the angle of the shot changed, most likely as the robot moved to observe unseen. Samson spoke first, asking if Nefeli had brought what he'd requested: antibiotics for a crewmember. She said no. Samson tried bargaining. Nefeli said no. He tried pleading, then threats, but Nefeli said no. It was just as Estelle had described it to Melina, just as Nefeli had described it to her wife.

Finally, Samson insulted her, insinuated that she was a terrible person for not helping someone who was sick. Melina watched as her mother again refused to help, an edge to her voice that she'd never heard before. *"I'm sorry,"* Nefeli said, *"but I have to protect my family."*

Nefeli left the alley. The recording ended.

"There was no crime," the robot said happily. "I am programmed with all legal codes and procedures. I must stand as a witness, so that the data will be made accurate."

Robots couldn't lie. The data within their memory units could not be tampered with or altered without causing catastrophic corruption. The footage had to be real.

Nefeli had refused to aid the smugglers. She was innocent. And here was hard, irrefutable evidence that could prove it.

"You're too late," Melina said. Her voice sounded crackly. She cleared her throat. "Everyone's left. Ferry's gone."

"We could download the video and send it to Auntie Estelle," Reiko suggested eagerly.

"That will not be admissible in court," the robot said. "Section 47-C of the Federal Legal Code."

Melina looked away from the blank wallscreen, a vague memory from school surfacing. "It's right. Evidence collected by robots can only be presented in court by the robot that collected it."

"Because robots can't be tampered with," Reiko finished. "Shit."

Melina glanced at her but swallowed the rebuke. She wanted to say a lot worse, mostly to herself. Convinced of her mother's guilt, and angry about it, she hadn't even gone with Estelle to visit Nefeli in local custody. Now, evidence to the

contrary had walked through their front door. Evidence that would secure her mother's freedom, if they could only get it to Stilbon. There had to be a way. Melina had to find one.

Going to the authorities was pointless—they wanted a conviction. Every trusted adult was already on Stilbon. The only option was to take the robot there herself, but no ferry would get there in time. Melina didn't have her own ship yet, and her friends were scattered all across the System. They were too far away to help.

Except, perhaps, for one.

## Chapter Two

There were worse places to live than Liberty, especially on a cool winter's morning: the sun warm but not hot, a fresh breeze drifting up from the savannah, the back streets as empty as the faraway desert. Stilbon may have been the first planet settled in the Liber System, but Yereen was the true embodiment of the freedom those settlers had sought.

Kaleb rose out of his saddle and pedalled harder. Only the roads around the spaceport were paved, but he preferred dirt and gravel to asphalt and concrete, even if his bicycle tyres were now more patch than rubber. It felt real. Something that Stilbon and the Feds couldn't control.

It wasn't so much the control that Kaleb resented. It was the unfairness. When Kaleb's very first bike had been nicked, the Feds hadn't wanted to know. It had only been returned when Kaleb's dad had nicked it back. Yet when someone asked a medic for medical help, they'd been quick enough to lock her up and ship her off-planet. It reeked.

Estelle's bar was one low mud building in the long row of mud buildings that formed Liberty's unofficial nightlife district. Though it was as empty in the daytime as every other street on Kaleb's route, he still cycled into the alley at the rear. Yereenites drank gossip like gazelles drank lake water.

The message from Melina had been brief, but that was Melina. Always sentences, never paragraphs. It was why they had always worked so well together. Kaleb liked talking, and Melina was great at listening. In return, if she needed something, anything, Kaleb would provide. That's what he told anyone who asked about their dynamic. The reality was more complex, with the potential to spawn more

endless questions, and explanations that would inevitably be dismissed. Simple was better. Stilboni interference aside, freedom on Yereen wasn't limitless.

Kaleb dismounted at the back of the bar and hid his bike between the bulky composter and raised veg patch. The door to the stockroom was open.

"Your winter cucumbers are looking good," he called as he entered, eyes adjusting to the dimness. "Estelle's going to have fun pickling those. I can taste those late summer Mozzie Bites now."

Melina emerged through the beaded curtain that led to the bar, pushing her waves of brown hair out of her face. Another green bead dangled from the end of a slim braid tucked behind her right ear: a convenient indicator of zero-G when she was flying, or so she'd told Kaleb. He was pretty certain the bead was one of his, so he liked to think it was also a convenient reminder of home.

"You've never drunk a Mozzie Bite in your life," she told him.

"That you know of," Kaleb replied, flopping onto the worn beige sofa. "Any chance of a Wolfspaw? I'm gasping." The ride over had made him sweat—spring was approaching.

"Thanks for asking," Melina said, disappearing once more. She returned with a green bottle, snapped off the cap on the edge of a metal shelving unit, and handed it to Kaleb. "Please teach Reiko how to do that."

"That child is unteachable," Kaleb proclaimed, taking a sip. The strong mix of herbs reminded him of childhood visits to his grandparents, down near the old silicon mines. "If you dragged me here from Mam's shop to teach the brat manners, you'll be disappointed. I have none."

Melina grabbed his free hand and pulled him up off the sofa. Kaleb didn't resist, letting her drag him into the closet-like lean-to that served as Estelle's office. The walls

were covered in paintings, but Kaleb sensed that this was no time to admire them. He claimed the chair next to the desk, while Melina closed the door behind them and put her back against it.

“Long version, or short version?” she asked.

“Short,” Kaleb said. He’d noted the urgent tension in her stance, the strength of her grip, the incessant dance of her fingertips against her leg. “What do you need?”

“An inventory robot turned up here with irrefutable evidence that will clear my mother’s name,” Melina said. “I need to get it to Stilbon so it can stand as a witness in the trial.”

Kaleb’s Wolfspaw very nearly went down the wrong way. He swallowed. “I regret not asking for the long version.” He disassembled Melina’s statement into organisable chunks. Nefeli was innocent. A robot could prove it. They had to get the robot to Stilbon.

“Okay,” he said. “What do you need from me, specifically?”

“A ship.”

Kaleb tapped the rim of his bottle against his lower lip. “What are we talking? Ferry tickets? Hitchhiking? This is more your area than mine.” Melina had a bunch of other friends who were pilots, though he’d never met them. Astros, the rest of the System called them. People who for some insane reason preferred zooming about space in metal boxes to the safety of the ground humans had evolved to inhabit.

“The ferry will take too long, and I don’t know of anyone close enough to give us a lift. I need to leave this afternoon.” Melina shook her head. “Find me a ship and I’ll fly it myself.”

“Those don’t just get blown up from the desert, you know.”

“Can you do it, or not?”

Kaleb downed the rest of his drink and stood, discarding the empty bottle on the desk. "I can do it." He made a few calculations. "Meet me at the spaceport at half-three. Bring snacks. Lots of snacks."

"You're coming?" she asked. Kaleb heard surprise, and scepticism, and a good dash of hope, which sealed the deal.

"As if I'd let you have some crazy space adventure without me." If his own voice betrayed his misgivings, Melina was kind enough to ignore it.

After the customary hug and a brush of lips against her temple, Kaleb left, retrieving his bike and grappling with the problem while he rode.

Melina needed a ship: one she could fly, fast, big enough for them and a robot of indeterminate size. Also at least a semi-legal acquisition, or they'd be picked up by immigration the moment they entered Stilboni orbit. Tricky.

Fortunately, Kaleb knew a guy.

#

The sun had risen higher when he arrived at the lake to the south of Liberty. A few native gazelles were visible beneath a solitary tree on the far bank, picking at the lush grass at the edge of the savannah. Kaleb padlocked his bike to a signpost and ambled down to the shore, where a couple of kids paddled in the shallows. He stayed out of splashing distance and smiled at them. There weren't many people in Liberty he didn't know.

Further down the shore, Kaleb approached a rotting wooden jetty that had been there longer than living memory. The lake was a place for parties, but this was not where you wanted to be roasting skewers of veg and precious gazelle meat on the night of the summer solstice.

A young man sat on the edge of the jetty, kicking the water. Kaleb leapt up several metres behind him. The wood creaked loudly beneath his boots.

“Hey, Tex.”

Tex startled at the noise and whirled his head around, stumbling to his feet. Rivulets of cold water ran down his white ankles. “What do you want?”

Kaleb brushed one of his dangling braids from his face and fingered the clay-glass beads at the end. Tex’s firm jaw was set, his hands curled into fists. Limp green locks obscured part of his expression, but Kaleb recognised anger. Fear.

He dropped his braid and fixed his dark brown eyes on Tex’s. “I need a ship.” His tone was as casual as his gaze was sharp. “Your ship.”

“I don’t have one,” Tex said.

“Your aunt’s ship,” Kaleb clarified, waving his hand back towards the mountains, and the spaceport in their shadow. “Rhiannon’s speedy little shuttle. We both know you have access to it. As far as I’m concerned, that makes it yours, and I need it.”

He watched Tex, noting the curl of a lip, the twitch of muscle. The anxiety. The hatred. Kaleb knew the latter well—it burned in him.

“No,” Tex said.

“Yes,” Kaleb contradicted. “I’ve been to the port. It’s there. I know that Rhiannon’s gone south and isn’t expected back anytime soon. I want that ship, and you’re going to give me the codes to get on it.”

Tex tried to look taller. Pointless: he already towered over Kaleb. Most guys did. It wasn’t intimidating.

“No,” Tex repeated. “You don’t scare me.” Wrong. “I’m done with this. There’s a line.”

Kaleb laughed at him. "Here's some news, in case you missed it. There are no lines. You simply do as I say, when I say it. And I say I want that ship."

Tex stood his ground. Kaleb didn't particularly like doing this, but there was certainly some perverted justice in it. If anyone had to suffer in the quest to prove Nefeli's innocence, it ought to be Tex. There wasn't much justice in the System. You had to take what you could get.

Kaleb took several steps forward. "Actually, no. You're right. There are lines. And you must be the expert, because you've crossed quite a few." He got close enough to Tex that he could feel hot breath against his forehead. "If you want to keep this line intact, fine. No problem. I'm sure there are other people who would be interested in learning about Rhiannon's ship, though."

"You wouldn't," Tex said, with false certainty.

Kaleb turned on his heel and started to walk back down the jetty. He wasn't bluffing. Kaleb Ashton never bluffed. He wouldn't go to the Feds right away, but if he couldn't find another ship for Melina, and Nefeli was convicted because of Tex's refusal, he wouldn't hesitate.

"Fine," Tex spat.

Kaleb stopped. "Glad we're in agreement," he said. "Spaceport. Three-fifteen. Don't be late."

A clammy hand caught his wrist.

"Wait," Tex said. "What do you need it for?"

"That doesn't concern you," Kaleb said, shaking him off in disgust. "You don't get to ask questions."

"If you're taking it off-planet, I'm coming with you."

Silence.

“You are joking,” Kaleb eventually managed.

“I’m coming,” Tex repeated. “It’s a six-bunk. Plenty of room.”

“Why the scorching-desert-hell would you want to?”

Tex exhaled harshly through his nose. “Because Rhiannon is not someone to be crossed. If anything happens to that ship, I know you’ll pin it on me, so I’m coming to make sure it comes back in one piece.”

Not for a long time had Kaleb seen Tex so determined. He didn’t like it, but he had a deadline. Melina needed that ship. No time for games.

“Fine,” Kaleb agreed. “Spaceport. Three-fifteen.”

He turned his back on Tex and headed for home, seething.

If Tex wanted to be stuck with Kaleb and Melina for two days, fine. Kaleb would ensure he would regret it. And if Tex did one single, solitary thing to jeopardise Melina’s mission, well: there was *low*, and there was *low*. If Nefeli went down on smuggling charges, Kaleb was certain that he and Tex would discover just how low Kaleb was willing to sink.

### Chapter Three

It wasn't far from the lake to Tex's house via the back alleys, passing washing lines and veg patches. The well-trodden grass paths were soft and cool beneath his feet. If he went barefoot wherever possible, his shoes would last longer, maybe all the way through his final semester of school. The prospect of a law degree on Stilbon was a better use of the family savings than footwear, though he'd need new shoes for university. Something smart, to match the cream hand-me-down coat from his father's student days.

The backdoor was ajar. Not a good sign. Tex had hoped that his parents would be out, so he could pack in peace and leave a note to explain his absence. Whoever was home would want a proper explanation.

"Son?"

The call came down the hallway as Tex stepped onto the tiled kitchen floor. He cut through the dining area into the sitting room, and found his father cross-legged on the woven rug, xylophone scales emanating softly from hidden speakers.

"I thought you had a class," Tex said. His father taught meditative reflection at the community hall. There was little appetite for such practices on Yereen, especially those taught by an expatriate Stilboni, but it kept him occupied. Tex's mother fixed bicycles, which paid well enough, though in Liberty, social capital was worth far more than Liberos. His mother had condemned herself to social poverty the moment she'd eloped with his father.

"Cancelled." His father waved a hand. "Another person wanted the hall, and it is too cold to be outside." Three decades on Yereen, and he still hadn't acclimatised. "Did you come home to study?"

"No," Tex said. "I came to pack. I'm going away for a day or two."

His father frowned and uncrossed his legs. "Where? Is Rhiannon back? Janet never said."

"She's not back," Tex said, not that his aunt kept his mother abreast of her movements. "Though I am going off-planet."

"With who?"

"Melina Odessa."

Tex was almost sure of that, mostly because Kaleb had refused to tell him anything about the trip. He'd always been extra sensitive, and extra dangerous, when she was involved. Also: what was Kaleb going to do with a ship? The most Tex had ever seen him fly was a kite.

"That medic's daughter?" Tex nodded. "Ah, yes. Good for you."

"Good for me?"

His father smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, good for you. She is pretty. Time for you to put yourself back on your bicycle, after that Adrian boy." Tex tried not to twitch at the mention of that name. His father's eyebrow fell, and a warning finger rose instead. "Be cautious, however. We cannot have your heart broken again. That girl wants to be a pilot. Those Astro people, they eschew proper relationships. Space makes them cold, I think. If she joins them, well!" He clapped his hands. "That will be an end to it."

"I'll keep it in mind," Tex said, already heading for his bedroom. It wasn't worth arguing. His father was Stilboni to the bone. Kaleb was right, Tex did know a lot about lines, but he was wrong to say that Tex's knowledge came from crossing them. On Stilbon, lines were toed.

“Do not be discouraged!” his father called. “Offer her your best charm. Perhaps you can change her mind about that nonsense. Prove that she has a heart to love after all.”

“Sure.” As if Tex was going to steal Kaleb Ashton’s girlfriend. As if Kaleb didn’t have enough reasons to hate him.

It didn’t take long to pack. This was far from the first time he’d been called upon to leave Yereen at short notice. At least he wasn’t having to do it in the dead of night. Aside from Tex himself, only his mother knew the true nature of Rhiannon’s business, and it needed to stay that way. Kaleb might think that he was making Tex’s life hell with all his little demands, but most of the time, Tex hardly noticed. Rhiannon had been running his life for years.

That was why he was so livid with Kaleb now. Of all the things Kaleb could have asked him for, it had to be this. Rhiannon’s ship. Tex was doomed, but he’d had to agree. His only chance to get himself, his cornered mother, and his unwitting father free of Rhiannon was to make a life on Stilbon as a lawyer. Kaleb threatened to ruin that with just one word, and Tex could not allow that.

He put his boots on, shouldered his backpack, and left. There was no point saying goodbye to his father: one glance through the doorway showed him standing on his head, toes centimetres from the ceiling, safely cloistered within his own mind. Tex envied him.

#

All roads led to the spaceport. It was the tallest structure on Yereen, three floors of concrete and imported steel. Often, Tex daydreamed about walking in in broad daylight like this, bag packed, and using his university savings to buy ferry passage to

somewhere unknown. Haring off in Rhiannon's shuttle with Kaleb and (undoubtedly) his girlfriend would forever sour that vision.

The carpark was typically barren. Whoever had designed it had foolishly expected Yereen to become more bustling and affluent than it had. Nobody wanted to come to Yereen except Yereenites, and Yereenites didn't want to leave. The only four-wheeled vehicles around were shining Federal police cars, and a handful of scruffy taxis recharging their batteries.

Kaleb was waiting between two ornamental bushes on the small entrance plaza. He'd thrown a brown pilot's jacket over his faded lime t-shirt—probably Melina's. His dark braids were pulled back into a ponytail, except for two that hung free to frame his face.

"You're late," Kaleb said.

Barely. "I'm here, all right?" Tex snapped. "Where's your girlfriend? I'm assuming you didn't suddenly get your pilot's licence."

Before Kaleb's expression settled on peeved, Tex caught a brief hint of exasperation. "A few things we should clear up. First: Melina isn't my girlfriend, not that that, as ever, is any of your concern. Second: that no questions rule? Still applies. You speak only when spoken to, you do precisely as you are told, and you stay out of our way." He stepped right up to Tex, somehow managing to seem menacing despite being no taller than Tex's shoulder. "Third: if anything goes wrong, I am holding you personally responsible."

To Tex's displeasure, his skin prickled. "Is that likely?"

"Is that a question?" Kaleb mocked. He made for the entrance, motioning impatiently for Tex to follow.

Inside, the traveller's lounge wasn't quite deserted enough. Tex hunched his shoulders and kept his head down. His parents had been hounding him for months to stop dyeing his hair. He'd only started doing it in the first place to infuriate Kaleb, show him that his stupid green hair prank hadn't got to him. Owning it made Tex feel powerful, but he should have listened to his parents. It was too distinctive. With Rhiannon, he could cover it with a hood, but that wouldn't work in the daylight. The chances of Rhiannon finding out about this were perilously high.

Tex followed Kaleb out onto the field. Rhiannon's ship was tucked back on the far side, close to the large freight area of the port. Nobody stopped them approaching it. Customs and immigration on Yereen were a joke.

The *Parisian* was long and narrow, like an ancient Earth arrow. Once silver in colour, its metal hull was now flecked with scorch marks and scratches. Leaning against it, dressed similarly to Kaleb, was indeed Melina Odessa. Several worn holdalls sat at her feet, along with a younger girl, and an inventory robot. Only the girl was not dressed for travelling: her knitted poncho looked far from sturdy, and her woven flip-flops were ill-suited for space.

"He's here," Kaleb announced.

The younger girl got up, smoothing creases from her leggings. "Who are you?" she asked Tex.

"That's Tex," Melina said, looking at him like he was an intriguing mathematics problem. "We went to school with him." She inclined her head in greeting, which he hesitantly returned, then gestured to the girl. "Reiko, my cousin."

"Hi," the girl—Reiko—said. "The robot's name is Flak. I persuaded it that its original designation is way too much of a mouthful." She smiled sweetly, and Tex's

opinion of Melina diminished. How could she let an innocent child hang around with people like Kaleb and himself?

“Hello,” the robot said happily. “This unit is designated 7729FL7K. Please call me Flak, as this pseudonym has logical utility.”

“Hi,” Tex said slowly to both child and machine.

The presence of the robot was intriguing. Robots were beholden to the truth. That suggested that, aside from the blackmail and suspicious acquisition of a spacecraft, this trip was not as dubiously legal as Tex had immediately assumed. And Reiko was Melina’s cousin—did that make her Nefeli Odessa’s niece?

“Let’s go,” Kaleb said, kicking Tex in the calf. “Move it.”

Tex worked the keypad on the *Parisian’s* side door. It flashed orange and the door opened, folding downwards into a gangway. Kaleb pushed past him and ushered Melina and Reiko up the ramp with the bags. Flak followed. Tex brought up the rear, hoping to Earth, Sol and Mars that his aunt hadn’t left any merchandise on board.

They were going to Stilbon. That was the only thing that made sense. Tex was up to date on his gossip, thanks to his mother. Nefeli Odessa’s daughter and niece desperate for a ship, right before her trial was due to start? This had to be a trip to Stilbon, though the robot remained an enigma.

He found the others in the cockpit, having passed Flak securing itself to the sternward wall of the mess, boxlike with its neck fully retracted. Melina was already in the pilot’s seat to the left. Tex tried to claim the co-pilot’s before Kaleb could, but Reiko beat them both.

“Melina’s the captain,” Kaleb said, as if they were still children in the crèche, playing at being explorers. “What she says goes.” He collapsed onto the two-person bench behind Melina.

“Strap in,” Melina said, starting to flick switches. Tex sat down on the bench behind Reiko and did as she said.

“You do know how to fly this model?” he asked, unable to help himself. If Melina crashed the *Parisian*, that would be the end of him. Not the crash—Rhiannon. Perhaps this hadn’t been the best decision after all.

The thud of the side door closing; the click and hiss of the airlock mechanism—too late to get off now. Kaleb looked at him patronisingly from across the aisle.

“Melina can fly anything.”

Tex hoped that was true. He focused on the hum of the ship’s engines, braced for a stutter that never came. The *Parisian* slowly rose through the air on the radioed command of a bored traffic controller, and he closed his eyes. He was leaving Yereen. Going to Stilbon. Just what he’d always wanted—but not like this.

## Chapter Four

The sky outside the cockpit windows darkened rapidly into inky blackness. Pushed back into his seat by g-force as the *Parisian* reached escape velocity, Kaleb's fingers fought to touch the straps across his chest. The very first time he'd been to space, it had been a roundtrip on the public ferry to the tundra settlement on Arazon that his mother had won on the lottery. The pressure and the juddering and the vacuum had scared him. They still did.

His very distant ancestors must have enjoyed being strapped to a missile, and hurtling through the unknown, or Kaleb would never have been born. Evidently the genes containing that attitude had not been passed down to Kaleb. The very notion of space travel ought to terrify any living creature. No matter the skill of your pilot, or the solidity of your ship, there was always risk.

Rhiannon's ship didn't seem that solid now that he was trapped inside it, struggling to breathe, with nothing to think about except the scuffs on the hull. Had there been rust? Were those scratches really cracks, that with the precise exertion of stress would cleave the ship apart?

Even if they made it out of Yereen's atmosphere, there was the risk of breaking down. The *Parisian* had no escape pods, and there was little hope of rescue, not for a private craft. They'd drift until they died of starvation, killed each other, or were picked off by marauding pirates.

Why did Melina want so desperately to live in such a horrible place? What enjoyment could anyone ever find in this? And what would happen if he threw up now?

An orange light on the dashboard began blinking gently. The pressure against Kaleb's ribs and face disappeared, and he floated several centimetres out of his seat

before the artificial gravity kicked in. His body dropped more quickly than the contents of his stomach, and he sucked in his cheeks, willing the nausea down.

Melina tapped the central keypad, probably entering their destination so that the computer could calculate a route. In the ancient tradition of fitting spacecraft with redundant systems, the keys were tactile as well as touch sensitive, and clacked unsettlingly against their housing.

Next to Melina, Reiko yawned. Kaleb flicked his gaze to the right, where Tex was watching Melina intently. The urge to reprimand him was strong, but Kaleb had helped Melina revise for her pilot's exams. He knew what was coming next, and that he would be better off keeping his mouth shut.

"Switching to half-light," Melina said, reaching for a lurid orange lever between the front seats that was missing its protective cover. One pull, and even with the dampeners, they were again all thrown back by the acceleration. Kaleb concentrated on counting to twenty. At thirteen, the sensation subsided, and beeps from the dashboard signalled that the *Parisian* had attained half the speed of light.

Outside, the dreaded void was now pitch black, punctuated by the faint streaks of distant stars. Some people, Melina included, seemed to find beauty in travelling at such a speed. Not Kaleb. Stars were beautiful, it was true, but Liber's brightness made them hard to see from space. You had to be on the ground to see them shine.

Several clicks: the others freed themselves from their restraints. Kaleb did the same, fumbling the clips. He needed some water.

Melina flicked more switches, checked the central monitor on the dashboard, and paused for a second too long. Kaleb's heart skipped, but when she swivelled her chair around to address them, her expression was infuriatingly unreadable.

“Everyone all right?” Her gaze circled to Kaleb, who made himself nod. “Okay,” she continued. “With solar orbits as they are, we should reach Stilbon in approximately twenty-one hours. Not ideal, but if pilots could control the position of the planets, we’d all be flying superyachts.”

She turned to Tex. “I know this is your aunt’s ship. I don’t know why you’re here, or how Kaleb arranged this. Honestly, I don’t want to.” That was fine. Kaleb didn’t particularly want her to know, either. “But all being well, in two days’ time, my family will owe you a considerable debt. So, thank you.”

Tex looked surprised. Pleasantly surprised. Kaleb crossed his arms and slouched in his seat. Sod Melina’s family owing Tex anything. Sod *anyone* owing Tex anything.

Melina called Kaleb’s name, and he tried to appear nonchalant. “Can you do an inventory for me, please?”

“Why?” Reiko asked. “We have an inventory robot. Make Flak do it.”

Even the robot in question would have had no trouble understanding the distrustful glance Melina threw at the cockpit door. Pilots did not like robots.

“Kaleb can do it,” she said. “Just the storage in the crew areas. Any cargo should be on the manifest.”

“I’ll do it,” Tex interjected.

A puff of air escaped Kaleb’s nose. Of course he would. No doubt there was something on this ship that Tex didn’t want him to find.

“Okay,” Melina agreed, before Kaleb could concoct a viable protest. “Thanks, Tex. In that case, Kaleb, you can run a systems check, make sure everything’s working correctly. Engineering bay is at the stern, through the cargo hold.”

“No way,” Kaleb said, raising his palms. “That is the worst idea you have ever had, Lee.”

“It’s only a few diagnostics,” Melina said. “There’ll be a macrotab down there; just plug it into each system and the tab will do the rest. It’s easy, I promise. Very user friendly.”

She sounded like her mother, Nefeli. The calm, gentle medic who could stop a toddler crying in five seconds. Earth, it was annoying. Melina knew he hated flying. Melina knew, too, that he was clueless about engineering. His interest lay in people, not machines. So why ask him to take care of the *Parisian’s* essential systems, the only things keeping them all alive? Why put that on him?

If she was trying to reassure him that the cosmic rust bucket was safe, it wasn’t working.

“I’m not doing it,” Kaleb said.

“I’ll do it,” Reiko offered, but Melina shook her head.

“Kaleb can do it,” she maintained. “I need to send a few messages. You can stay here and keep an eye on these readouts. Don’t touch anything. I’m serious. If things start beeping or flashing, yell.”

“Is that likely?”

Melina shrugged. “It’s not my ship.”

“Ugh, come on,” Reiko protested. “That’s baby work. Why can’t Kaleb do that, and I’ll run the diagnostics?”

Melina fell silent. Her eyes x-rayed Kaleb, who mentally squirmed. Finally, she said, “Because I’m the pilot, and I said so. Clear?”

Now that was Estelle talking. More than a few bar brawls had been doused by that tone. Wisely, Reiko acquiesced with nothing but a muttered “mature” that Melina ignored.

Kaleb was made of stronger stuff. “I’m still not doing it.”

“Kaleb,” Melina said.

“No.”

“I don’t want to argue.”

Neither did Kaleb, but he was not putting their lives in his hands. Why not give him Reiko’s job?

He looked at the dashboard, with its easy-to-read icons and displays. Baby work. Then his gaze drifted upwards, to the cockpit windows. Nothing out there but vacuum.

“Kaleb?”

Kaleb wrenched his attention back to Melina’s face and found that his knuckles were clenched around the edge of his seat. Slowly, he released his grip.

So, that was why he wasn’t getting Reiko’s job. Best not to leave the borderline astrophobe in a cockpit on his own.

Reiko huffed. “For Earth’s sake, just get Flak to do the diagnostics.”

“Yes,” Kaleb said, pointing at Reiko. “Make the machine look after the machines. Good idea.”

Melina grimaced, showing more emotion than she had in hours. “You know what? Fine. The robot can do it. But,” she added, looking Kaleb in the eye, “you’re supervising it.”

Kaleb said nothing.

“You don’t trust it,” Tex remarked. Kaleb had almost forgotten he was there, and did not appreciate the reminder.

“It’s a thing,” Melina said. “There’s nothing to trust. It’s a microtab on wheels.” She got up and squeezed Kaleb’s shoulder as she passed him. “Glad we got that sorted. Twenty-one hours to Stilbon.”

“Why have a robot if you dislike them?” Tex asked. Kaleb gave him the most murderous glare he could muster.

“Because we need it,” Reiko said, examining the dashboard. “It’s got evidence to clear Auntie Nefeli’s name. That’s if we even get to Stilbon, because no offence, your ship is rubbish.” She kicked an internal panel under the dashboard. It wobbled.

Kaleb was torn. He wanted to condemn Reiko for filling Tex in, but she was a kid who didn’t deserve it. He wanted to yell at Tex for bringing it up, and he was a git who definitely deserved it. He needed to go after Melina, who had wordlessly exited the cockpit, the door sliding shut behind her.

He stood, feeling like his legs belonged to a baby gazelle. “Just do your jobs,” he snapped on his way out.

The mess through which they had boarded was split into two halves. On the left was an L-shape of chipped chrome cupboards, with appliances that meant they wouldn’t have to live off nutrient bars and jerkies. In the far right corner, a couch curled around a circular wood-effect table. The rest of the space was open, due to the exterior doors to the immediate left and right of the cockpit. Earth-willing, their seals were solid. The only airlock would be in the far back of the engineering bay, exclusively for emergency access to the outer hull and engines.

No Melina. Flak had released itself from the wall and turned its unnerving eye-like cameras on Kaleb. He told it to follow him.

It had been Kaleb’s decision to use the *Parisian*. Maybe he’d been too hasty. Maybe there had been another way to get the robot to Stilbon—but Kaleb hadn’t looked for one. He’d heard *I need a ship*, and seen a prime chance to antagonise Tex. Melina was a brilliant pilot. Kaleb understood that much. So if they failed to get Flak to the trial, it would be because the *Parisian* was a pile of junk. It would be Kaleb’s fault.

Making sure Flak was behind him, Kaleb strode across to the far door and into the hallway beyond, down into the cramped heart of the ship.

#

It didn't take Tex long to complete the inventory. He started with the cabins, leaving the mess until last, making sure he was alone before triple-checking that the hidden compartment beneath the kitchenette worktop was secure. It was keyed to Rhiannon's biometrics, so there was no way for him to know if there was anything inside. Hopefully, no way for Kaleb or Stilboni immigration to know, either.

He uploaded the inventory list to the *Parisian's* mainframe from his microtab and reconfigured the small computer from palm- to thumb-size. Carefully—the slide was getting stiffer, and if it snapped, he couldn't replace it. He put it back in his pocket, and made his way to the stern, metal grating clanking under his feet.

There wasn't much cargo in the hold: a few empty crates, a small shipment of herbs, and a vat of green dye, made from the grasses of Yereen's great savannah. Tex hit the door control for the engineering bay and slipped inside. It should have been him running the diagnostics, not Kaleb, but he couldn't have allowed someone else to conduct the inventory. The mere existence of the secret compartment was suspicious if anyone found it, and his fellow travellers struck him as people who would be good at finding things.

One of the spotlights on the engineering bay's ceiling had been broken for as long as Tex had been coming aboard. It wasn't worth the hassle of fixing, but the missing light made the gunmetal space feel extra dingy and cold. Kaleb stood to the right, next to the airlock, holding the maintenance macrotab and scowling at the screen. Concerning, given that the tab was currently plugged into the primary life support system.

“Everything all right?” Tex asked, perfectly civil—for now. Space wasn’t the arena for exercising animosities, though that was unlikely to matter to Kaleb.

Kaleb didn’t look up. “Leave.”

“Is there a problem with the life support?”

A tinny voice made Tex jump, and the robot scooted out from behind Kaleb’s legs. “Primary life support system is running at ninety-two percent efficiency,” it declared. “This is within acceptable parameters. Secondary systems standing by, reading at ninety-four percent efficiency.”

This Flak definitely could have completed the diagnostics alone. Did Melina really distrust robots that much, or had she wanted Kaleb out of her way? Tex was betting on the latter.

“What it said,” Kaleb muttered. “Now leave.”

The scene in the cockpit had been enlightening. It had been years since Tex had last seen Kaleb look vulnerable, into something over his head. Passing up an opportunity to take advantage of that, and rebalance the scales, would be ludicrous, even if it did fill him with nerves. It had been years, too, since Tex had last tried something like this.

Tex leaned against the closed door and crossed first his arms, then his ankles, ignoring the traitorous pounding of his heart. Kaleb liked reading body language—let him read that. “Interesting spat you had with your girlfriend.”

Kaleb wrenched the connector cable out of the life support system. “She’s not my girlfriend. Go away.”

“Come on,” Tex said. “You’re inseparable. You stole Rhiannon Maxwell’s ship for her.”

“No,” Kaleb interrupted, shoving the cable into the port for the heating system. “I borrowed a ship from a clod of dirt I went to school with.”

“All that silent communication you do, the touching,” he continued, immune to Kaleb’s insults by now. “I’m not stupid. That’s not just a friendship.”

“How would you know? I don’t remember you ever having friends.”

Perhaps Tex wasn’t as immune as he’d thought, or maybe the truth always stung. Either way, he recognised that Kaleb was on the defensive, and kept pushing. “I’m just curious why you keep denying that she’s your girlfriend.”

Kaleb pushed the macrotab against the metal housing of the heating control unit. The magnaclip on the tab’s case engaged, and Kaleb let go, stepping away to stare at Tex. “There’s nothing to deny.”

“Seriously?” Tex asked, with as much condescension as he dared. “Maybe I haven’t had many friends, but I have had relationships. I know what they look like.” He shook his head. “I don’t see why you’re so sensitive. So she’s your girlfriend. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about your relationships,” Kaleb retorted. “Not that there’s much to hear. Can’t keep them around for long, can you?”

A feeling like electricity surged through Tex—but at the same time, a thought occurred. A wonderfully nasty one. His lips twisted into a grim smile.

Kaleb had been walking over him for so long. Yet if Tex was right, he finally had a chance to hit back. Behind the anger, he knew he ought to stop, but the temptation was too great.

“Melina’s not your girlfriend,” Tex said. “She’s not, is she? Because sure, you drop everything for her, blackmail for her, steal for her, even follow her halfway across the System when it’s clear you are terrified of space travel.” Kaleb’s entire being

screamed danger, but Tex had more than passed the event horizon of this black hole.

No going back.

“You do all of that for her,” he continued, “but what does she do for you?”

Nothing. Except the looks, and the touching. That must drive you mad.” Tex

straightened his spine and looked down on his tormentor. “So no, I believe you. She’s not your girlfriend. Because it’s obvious she doesn’t love you back.”

Kaleb looked at him for a long time, silent. Eventually, Tex realised that it wasn’t out of shock. It was an intimidation tactic.

“I’m not in love with Melina,” Kaleb said calmly, which threw Tex entirely. “Not like that. Though I can see how you were confused. Everyone knows Stilbonis are so obsessed with their money and their status that they don’t have any love left for anyone they’re not sleeping with.”

“I’m not Stilboni,” Tex protested half-heartedly, knowing it made no difference.

“You act like one,” Kaleb said, “so you probably think like one. It’s not like you get out much, is it? You think you’re too good for Yereen.”

False. Tex kept to himself, but not because he hated Yereen. Kaleb was the reason. Kaleb, and people like him. People who thought that Yereenites were better than Stilbonis. Tex had yet to see much evidence of that.

“I don’t have to be in love with Melina to care about her,” Kaleb said, an edge entering his voice. “To love her. Just because a relationship doesn’t look the way Stilbon thinks it should, it doesn’t mean it’s any less of one.”

A relationship. He’d said relationship, not friendship. Tex’s brow furrowed.

“Wait. So she *is* your girlfriend?”

Kaleb’s lips thinned. “She’s not,” he said shortly. “She can’t be, because if I say that she is, you’ll make assumptions that aren’t true.”

“Like what?”

Kaleb looked as though he wanted to carve death threats on Tex’s retinas with his stare. “You just want some dirt on me, don’t you?”

Denial was futile. Tex wondered when Kaleb had moved so close that he could see every one of his eyelashes, every bead of clammy sweat in his hairline. When Kaleb spoke, he felt the words on the underside of his chin.

“Have it your way,” Kaleb said, reminding Tex of a savannah wolf on the hunt. “Not that it is any of your business, but I’m aromantic asexual. I’m not explaining it. You know how to read. I’ve seen you with your law books, trying to get a life on a planet that doesn’t want you. If you don’t know it, look it up. I don’t do the whole romance-and-sex thing. So yes, Melina and I have a relationship, but it’s not remotely romantic, or sexual, and it does not need to be.”

Tex swallowed. Instinct told him to flee, but he couldn’t move through solid metal.

“I’d guess on Stilbon, that counts as dirt,” Kaleb told him. “Your lot don’t like people describing themselves, do they? Communicating. Celebrating our differences. All that freedom stuff. Earth, Stilbon’s the reason there isn’t a word for me and Melina. After centuries of those idiots running the System, we’re lucky to have the words we do have.” His lip curled. “Trouble is, Tex, this isn’t Stilbon. And I’m not Stilboni. So you can go ahead and spread everything I’ve told you around Liberty as much as you like. Good luck making anyone care. I sure as hell don’t.”

With that, Kaleb went back to stabbing at the maintenance tab, as if Tex had never walked in.

Tex had to hope that Kaleb was a one-off, or he’d never make it as a lawyer. Kaleb had seen straight through him, seen exactly what he’d wanted, and had simply

given it to him. It was masterful. Now Tex had just the juicy, burning, deeply personal revelation he'd been hoping for, and it was worthless.

Tex had spent years trying to cultivate the ability not to care. If not for Rhiannon, he might have managed it, but Kaleb was on another level entirely. He was wrong: people on Yereen would care. Not as much as on Stilbon, but they would still care. It wouldn't be a scandal, but it would still be gossip. Yet Kaleb was one of those aquatic worms that fed on mulch at the bottom of the lake. Just when you thought you could catch him, he deftly slipped away.

Outplayed, Tex retreated to the cargo hold. He sat down behind an empty crate and brought his knees to his chest. Again, Kaleb had bested him. He always did. Yet something about this felt different. Not with Kaleb—with him. Something felt off, when his mind replayed Kaleb's revelation, like more worms were crawling along his veins, behind his ears, into his skull.

Somewhere in his brain, there was a thread that demanded to be picked. Tex feared to do so; feared what he might find. Instead, he clung to his anger, and wished he'd stayed at home.

## Chapter Five

In the cockpit, Reiko spun in her chair. It could do a full revolution in either direction, which was more fun than staring at computer readouts. She'd never anticipated that space would be this boring.

She'd found the launch fun, so maybe re-entry would be too, but the flying through the void part wasn't exhilarating in the slightest. There was nothing to see outside: without the steady vibration of the hull and the low thrum of the engines, she wouldn't have known they were moving. The faint streaks of stars looked less wondrous and more like dead bugs on the windshield of Auntie Nefeli's ancient SUV. Riding in that was more thrilling than spaceflight.

That was problematic. For as long as she could remember, Reiko had wanted to be a pilot, like Melina. All her friends agreed that it was much cooler than being an agriculturalist like most of their parents, or going down the quarries, or even becoming a mechanic like Josefin's cousin. Reiko was going to finish school, and become a pilot, and go out and see the galaxy. It would be fun and exciting.

This? This was not fun and exciting.

She'd been offended at being given a babyish job, but then had grasped that this was actually what pilots spent most of their time doing: checking displays and listening for radio messages. Too simple. Reiko needed more stimulation than that, so she'd started watching funny videos on her microtab. On Stilbon, you could get micros that projected holograms. Maybe once they got Flak to the trial, she could find a shop and steal one. It wouldn't take much to hack it so the retailer couldn't trace it.

The symbols on the *Parisian's* dashboard had been relegated to the background. Most of them were orange, which Reiko assumed was probably fine. Things in space were meant to follow Federal standards, AKA Stilboni standards, and

Stilbonis liked orange. Orange was good, green bad, blue terrible, red fantastic. So when one of the orange symbols started to turn red, she ignored it.

Then it started to pulse in time with an incessant, high-pitched beeping, and she reasoned that, since this was a Yereenite ship usually flown by a Yereenite pilot, red probably meant what it was supposed to: drop everything and panic.

Reiko poked her head out into the mess. Tex was sitting at the round table, giving a nutrient bar the same respect a particularly vicious wolf would give a gazelle carcass. No sign of Melina, or of Kaleb and Flak.

“Lee?” she called. Tex looked up, but nobody else appeared. Reiko was reluctant to physically abandon her post, for all the good she could do, so she raised her voice. “Lee!”

Still no Melina. Tex held up a finger and visibly moved to swallow. He had to be Stilboni: nobody else would care about talking with their mouth full in an emergency.

At last the hallway door opened, but it was Kaleb. “Reiko?”

“Where’s Flak?” Reiko asked, momentarily distracted. She didn’t care that it was just an object. Robots were cute, and helpful. Flak especially.

“Finishing the diagnostics,” Kaleb said, proving Reiko right: Flak could have done it without him. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to panic anyone,” Reiko said mildly, “but there’s a slight tiny problem with the ship.”

Kaleb’s face went blank, and his shoulders tensed. “What kind of slight tiny problem?” he asked, in the kind of calm voice adults liked to use when they wanted you to know that you’d really messed up.

Tex suddenly became fascinated by the wood-effect pattern on the table. Reiko hoped that if he thought he was in for it, that meant she was off the hook for once.

“We’re running out of fuel,” she said.

Kaleb turned slowly towards Tex, sliding one hand to his hip and bracing the other against the wall, blocking one of Tex’s escape routes from the couch. “Oh, are we?”

“That’s not my fault,” Tex said, not looking up.

“It’s your ship.”

“You never told me where we were going,” Tex protested, somehow making the valid excuse sound weak. “How was I to know how much fuel we needed? Anyway, Melina was the one flying. It’s not my fault she didn’t check the fuel gauge before taking off.”

Kaleb’s expression reminded Reiko of the gathering clouds that preceded a rare autumn rainstorm. Sensing drama, she inched into the mess for a better view.

Unfortunately, before any entertainment could commence, Melina appeared, sidestepping around Kaleb. “What’s going on?”

“Apparently, we’re low on fuel,” Kaleb told her without looking. Tex may have seemed wolf-like before, but now he was the gazelle. He even had the green hair to match.

“Yeah, I know,” Melina said. “I’ve sorted it.”

Tex deflated and rested his head against the insulated inner hull like a condemned smuggler given a sudden reprieve. Reiko slouched in the cockpit doorway in disappointment.

“We can stop at Fortitude station,” Melina went on. “It’s on our route anyway. We’ll refuel there, then get going again. Should only lose us an hour or two.”

“All right,” Kaleb said, sitting down on the couch. At the opposite end, Tex impossibly tried to scoot further away. “So do you have a plan in mind for getting the

fuel? I can probably come up with something, though I've never stolen from a service station before."

Reiko's ears pricked up, but Tex was having none of it. "You can't steal it."

"What, are you going to buy it for us?" Kaleb asked with dripping scepticism.

"Please do. Since it's your fault we didn't have enough in the first place, it does seem fair."

"It's *not* my fault," Tex repeated.

"Stop it," Melina told Kaleb. "I've got friends on Fortitude. There's no need for stealing, or anything else." She pointedly indicated Tex, and Reiko didn't need fantastical powers of telepathy to know that Melina wanted Kaleb to leave him alone. "This is my world. I know what I'm doing. Leave this one to me."

She turned and walked towards Reiko, heavy boots clomping a metallic rhythm on the floor. Reiko let her pass, then followed her into the cockpit. A last look at the boys showed Tex with his head in his hands, and Kaleb stomping off in the direction of the cabins.

The cockpit door slid closed. Melina sat down and turned off the fuel alarm, though the red light remained, mixing with the dimmed overhead spotlights to create a bizarrely pretty pink glow. Reiko returned to the co-pilot's chair, toeing off her flip-flops and curling her feet under herself as Melina altered their heading.

"I've never seen you speak to Kaleb like that," Reiko observed.

By the time Melina responded, Reiko had stopped expecting her to. "You're not in Liberty that often."

Reiko didn't need the reminder. Things actually happened in Liberty. Nothing ever happened at home. "Still, that was brutal. For you, I mean," Reiko amended. "To him. You've said way worse to me."

“Only when you needed to hear it,” Melina said with a faint smile.

“Kaleb must have really pissed you off, then,” Reiko said.

“Language.”

Melina rubbed her eyes, then reached absentmindedly for the green clay-glass bead at the end of a slim braid hanging by her ear. Reiko assumed the bead had come from Kaleb, since it was a match for the myriad that adorned his own braids. Yereenites didn't get to keep much of the translucent clay-glass they quarried for themselves. Most of it was exported to Stilbon, to people who valued having beautiful things in their huge apartments over buying sturdy shoes, or medicine for their kids. Hell, they were Stilboni: they could probably afford all of that, and still have Liberos left over.

“Kaleb's not a fan of two things,” Melina said quietly. “Space, and Tex Korovin. He's managed to get stuck with both, by his own hand, and he's not coping very well with it.”

“Didn't you ask him to come?” Reiko asked.

“No.” Melina shook her head. “If I made him think that I did, I didn't mean to, and he was the one who brought Tex into it. So I'm not going to tiptoe around him to the detriment of the trip. He decided to be here; he can deal with the consequences. I've got enough to worry about.”

She dropped the bead and kicked her chair into a reclining configuration, staring out of the window. Reiko followed her gaze, but there was nothing there except desolate, endless night.

## Chapter Six

Several service stations were scattered throughout the Liber System, set in orbits of varying distance from its sun. Most were built on harnessed asteroids, or the moons of the System's uninhabited worlds. Fortitude was an asteroid station. It wasn't big enough to see many cruise liners or private yachts, but it housed more than just a fuelling depot and provision store. For Astros, the pilots and other space workers of the System, Fortitude was something like a second home.

All of Melina's practical, non-simulated flight experience before earning her license had been on short flights with friendly Astros willing to welcome another into the fold. Many of those flights had begun or ended at Fortitude. One pilot would stop there to refuel, and Melina would hop off and find another to return her to Yereen. Bringing the *Parisian* through the designated traffic lane towards the asteroid's mottled surface was simple, even under Kaleb and Tex's keen scrutiny.

A greeting from Fortitude's traffic control came over the cockpit speakers, static disguising the accent. Shortwave radio wasn't the clearest or most sophisticated communication system, but it was a pilot's best friend: it was cheap, it was fast, and it worked.

Melina requested a fuel bay, and followed the provided directions, guiding the *Parisian* down in circles to the service station. Its triangle of connected geodesic domes came into view: one for Fortitude's handful of permanent residents, one for general visitors, and one for freight. The long arm of the fuelling centre stretched off the central visitors' dome, with parking bays along its length.

"Bigger than I expected," Kaleb murmured behind her. He didn't sound well, though she'd been trying her best to fly smoothly. The *Parisian* had good manoeuvrability, and it helped that Fortitude's artificial atmosphere provided little air

resistance: it was barely thick enough to remove the need for full spacesuits when walking to and from the complex.

Stilbon would be another matter. According to Tex's inventory, there was anti-sickness medication in the head. She loved Kaleb, but if he was going to be sitting behind her for that landing, she was prepared to force it down his throat herself.

Melina carefully parked the *Parisian* in its designated fuelling bay with hardly a bump. The relief from the rear of the cockpit was palpable. She went through the parking sequence and shut down most systems, leaving only the essentials of heat, air, and computation. The others had already unclipped their restraints by the time she could unclip her own.

"Now what?" Kaleb asked, perkier now that he was on a semblance of solid ground. He leaned over the back of her seat, peering out of the windows. The *Parisian* faced away from the station, though the view of space was mostly obscured by ships in the main parking area opposite them.

Melina reached back and touched her fingers to his. Kaleb usually craved touch more than she did, but she wanted the reassurance. "Now, I go and find Gareth."

"Who's Gareth?" Reiko asked.

"Her friend." Kaleb slotted their fingers together more securely, and Melina rejected any anxiety that she'd offended him with her words before. "He's the one who flies courier, right?"

"Yeah," Melina said.

Gareth was a pilot, a few years her senior, who operated as a freelance courier. He'd established a good reputation for speed and discretion, which went down well with Stilboni interplanetary business owners. Melina had other friends in the vicinity, but no one else with the Liberos to spare for someone else's fuel.

She spun her chair around and stood, Kaleb's hand falling away. "I'll meet you all back here in an hour," she told them. "I want to be gone in two. Make sure the robot stays on the ship."

Reiko hummed in acknowledgement. Tex shifted awkwardly in his seat, apparently unsure of what he should be doing.

"Give Gareth my best," Kaleb said, stretching his arms above his head. Terra firma and an off-balance Tex—no wonder the grey was retreating from his complexion.

Melina left him behind and readied herself to disembark the shuttle. She'd started leaving him behind more and more. Reiko, too, and her parents. Eventually she'd leave them altogether. More than ever, it was clear that Melina belonged at the helm of a ship, where even gravity was optional. She belonged in the stars.

Kaleb did not.

#

Reiko adjusted the seal of her filtration mask, which would help her breathe enough oxygen in the thin atmosphere outside Fortitude's domes. It was scary, knowing that it was the only thing keeping her alive, but that didn't dampen the thrill of standing on an actual asteroid. The mask was also keeping her face warm, as a bonus.

She trailed her bare fingers over the *Parisian's* hull in a temporary farewell, then winced at the icy sting. Wherever she walked, greyish-brown dust plumed up in clouds insubstantial enough to escape the pull of the artificial gravity pads. Melina's spare boots were too big for her, but if she'd still been in her flip-flops, her toes would probably have dropped off.

It was all right for Kaleb, leading the way in Melina's old pilot's jacket. Those were designed for all extremes of temperature. And Tex, plodding along at Reiko's

side—he had gloves, and a coat. Reiko had packed for a Stilboni summer, not a stop-off at a service station. Beneath her poncho, she was freezing.

“Can we get a move on?” she called to Kaleb. He was taking his time, moseying along with his hands in his pockets, surveying the other parked ships like they were entrees at a solstice buffet. Some of them were large enough to swallow her parents’ house.

“There’s no rush,” Kaleb said.

Reiko would beg to differ. She shoved her hands under her armpits. It was tempting to go back to the ship, but exploring the station was bound to be the highlight of the trip. Flying was dull, and Stilbon would only be exciting if that was code for terrifying. Reiko would continue to pretend that this was just some bonkers adventure, and Flak an amusing sideshow with no greater worth, for as long as possible.

A pale object appeared in her field of vision. It was a large cream-coloured duffle coat, with lemon piping and citrus-wood toggles. Tex’s coat, and he was holding it out to her.

“Here,” he said. Goosebumps were already rising on his bare wrists.

This was a first. Melina and Kaleb traded clothes to the point where they practically shared a wardrobe, but nobody outside of her family had ever offered Reiko their coat before.

Further ahead, Kaleb had noticed that she and Tex were no longer following him. His hands were on his hips, and he radiated disapproval. “What are you doing?”

“She’s cold,” Tex said.

“She’ll cope,” Kaleb snapped.

“She can talk,” Reiko said.

Looking Kaleb in the eye, she took the coat and put it on. Kaleb scowled but turned and started walking again.

Reiko trudged along, Tex keeping pace with her. His coat was massive. Reiko had never worn anything like it. It was very Stilboni, very professional. Must have cost a fortune, and ninety-nine percent of Yereenite families didn't have a fortune. Tex's parents had to have high aspirations for him. She tried to sniff the collar, wondering if Tex's soap was also imported from Stilbon, but nothing made it through the musty filtration mask.

Reiko may have only known Tex for about six hours, but he seemed decent. Why Kaleb hated him was a mystery. Reiko subtly looked him up and down. The green hair seemed pretty cool, and a daring statement for someone who also wore Stilboni-yellow outerwear. A rebel, then. She respected that. His face wasn't unpleasant to look at, either.

She wondered if she should have a crush on Tex. That might get her mam off her back about *boys* and *girls*. If she fancied Tex, she wouldn't have to pretend to fancy anyone else, and he was ideal. Objectively attractive and rebellious enough for it to be believable, but way too old for anything to ever come of it. Picking someone her own age would be embarrassingly awkward if it turned out they wanted to date her, because Reiko did not want to go there. Pilots didn't date grounders. And even if she didn't become a pilot, she was still getting off Yereen.

They reached the station's main dome, and Reiko was enveloped by warmth the moment she walked through the airlock's inner door. Immediately, she removed her mask, leaving it hanging from its lanyard around her neck.

The atrium was vast and packed with people wearing identical grubby lanyards—ferry passengers. Around the walls were shops, though it was difficult to

make out their wares beyond the crowd. An overhead sign pointed to a canteen in the far back, and ornamental potted trees were dotted here and there.

Reiko returned Tex's coat, noticing that the hem was now caked in asteroid dust from where it had dragged along the ground. Tex didn't comment on it—another mark in his favour. Not bothering to see if he and Kaleb would follow, Reiko wandered over to the nearest shop.

It was a gift shop. A spiral display of clay-glass bracelets caught her eye, the type of tacky jewellery her grandad made for the export market. It was weird to see it for sale, and to see people considering buying some. A sign said it was a traditional design. A traditional design of easy-to-produce tat, sure.

No doubt the other so-called traditional items on sale from other System worlds were equally bogus. Reiko wandered through Arazoni snow-spheres, Sylvan hand-carved sporks, and Calgarian gold-plated hairpins, and found Tex examining a shelf of tiny figurines.

“What are those?”

“Long lizards,” he said, showing her one. The long lizard was indeed very long-bodied, with four eyes on its head. This one was violent orange, but the whole colour spectrum was represented among those on the shelf. “They're native to Stilbon.”

Kaleb appeared at Reiko's elbow. “What are you doing?”

“Is that your phrase for the day, Kaleb?” Reiko asked sweetly. “Tex was showing me these Stilboni lizard things. They're kind of cute, though these colours are ridiculous.”

Kaleb looked at the figurines. “Well, Tex would know about ridiculous.”

Tex didn't respond. He simply stood there, refusing to stand up for himself.

“What is wrong with you?” Reiko muttered, directing it at both of them. She crossed the aisle and began scrolling through a wall-mounted macrotab offering previews of various data cards on sale. Handy for travellers: net signals had to bounce between constantly moving transmitters, so you couldn’t always get a decent connection. Data cards were old-school, but reliable.

Most of the cards were rubbish. The content of the popular music one was sickeningly vanilla. No rap, no rock, but plenty of awful Stilboni choral stuff. She backed out of it and tapped on an icon of a large shuttle on a green background. On closer inspection, the shuttle was landing, and the varying shades of green made up trees and foliage.

The card contained videos and documentaries about the exploration of the Liber System and beyond, to the next star system over. Reiko began reading a preview of a diary written by a Sylvan explorer, who was studying the behaviour of strange animals on a moon covered in jungle.

“What are you reading?” Tex asked politely.

“None of your business,” said Kaleb.

Reiko looked up, wondering if this would finally be the moment that Tex stepped up to the fight that Kaleb was gunning for.

No. Tex was glowering at his own feet. More of a reaction than he’d shown so far, but it didn’t look like he’d be swinging punches any time soon.

“It’s a data card on space exploration,” Reiko said. “Planets and stuff, not flying. Looks interesting.” It was interesting. Why didn’t they learn about this in school, instead of boring Federal civics?

“That does sound interesting,” Tex said, seeming grateful for the diversion.

Kaleb very deliberately rolled his eyes. The brewing fight might only need a little shove to get going. Reiko would be happy to help.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’d buy it, but I don’t have the money.”

Tex took the bait. “Then I’ll buy it for you.” He picked one of the cards off the shelf.

Kaleb grabbed his wrist. “Why would you do that?”

Disappointingly, Tex still didn’t rise to it, shaking Kaleb off like he was a persistent mosquito. “Education is important. You might not care about it, but I do. If children want to learn, someone should help them.”

“She doesn’t need your help,” Kaleb said. He snatched the card from Tex.

“You mean you’ll buy it for her?” Tex asked. “I didn’t think you had any money.”

“I don’t need money.”

“What, so you’ll steal it?”

Reiko fought to hide a grin at Tex’s sarcasm. This was getting good.

Kaleb looked at her. “Do you want it?”

Reiko nodded.

“Then yes,” Kaleb said in a low voice. “I will.”

“You can’t,” Tex said.

Kaleb leaned closer to him, closing his fingers over the card. “What are you going to do, Tex? Tell the Feds?” He straightened and waved his empty hands in the air. The card had vanished. “Come on, Reiko.”

She followed him back into the atrium, where Kaleb slipped the card into the front pocket of her poncho.

An impressive magic trick, but still no big showdown. Reiko craved the distraction of it. The tension there screamed louder than a fluorescent lizard, so the fight would come. It just had to arrive before they got to Stilbon, because if Tex and Kaleb got in the way of clearing her aunt's name, Reiko swore she would feel no guilt in helping Melina to murder them both.

#

The noise of the ferry crowd fell away as Melina walked down the corridor connecting Fortitude's atrium to the freight dome. She emerged into a small travellers' lounge, a miniature of that at the spaceport in Liberty: several rows of tatty black couches, interspersed with burnished steel tables. Any similarities ended there. The lounge floor gleamed, thanks in part to a mat just inside the doorway on which Melina made sure to wipe her boots. Instead of scuffed whitewash, the walls were black, and covered with sprayed-on images, symbols, and names, of all shades and cultures.

A woman lay sleeping on one of the couches, long auburn hair cascading into a pool on the floor. Melina crept across the lounge and on into the windowless curving corridor that ran around the circumference of the dome.

More artwork covered these walls, and the odd noticeboard. The defaced posters for Federal Founding Day that had decorated the corridor when Melina was last there had been replaced by amateur advertisements for shuttle races in honour of Freedom Fest, the Astros' unofficial holiday.

The floral aroma of boiled Thanotian sunfruit hit her upon entry to the freight canteen, releasing some of the tension in her muscles. Like the rest of the dome, the canteen walls were black beneath at least two centuries of art and graffiti, as was the high convex ceiling, on which was painted a map of the Liber System as it had appeared on the day Fortitude had opened. The cluttered chairs and tables were old

but spotless, many occupied by small groups of Astros who Melina knew by sight, if not name. She recognised Archie, a bearded old-timer who swore he'd been hauling ore from Calgary to Thanotia since before anyone's parents had been born, holding court from a patched armchair. He had a tumbler of liquid in one hand, while the other expertly twirled a magenta dart.

If Gareth couldn't help her, Archie might. Or Filipa, another daughter of Yereen, who Melina had passed in the corridor.

She weaved her way over to the bar, returning greetings to various people. An Astro canteen was always a place of warmth and friendship. Space was cold, and for all that it was home, it could be lonely. Cockpits had co-pilot chairs, but ship designs had made them largely obsolete. Co-pilots had become secondary pilots, there to fly while the captain slept. Even the largest freighters and liners often had only one person stationed on the bridge, except for dockings. Canteens, and bars, and stolen corners of loading bays were important. There was always a sliver of Astro community somewhere, with drinking and laughing and betting and darts, at once within and separate to the rest of the System. That's what they were. A scattered enclave, alone but for each other, for nobody who saw their future on the ground could truly understand an Astro's affinity for what stretched above the sky.

Gareth was sitting on a high, cushion-topped stool in front of the counter. Several bright carabiners hung off his utility belt, swinging whenever he moved. Melina slid onto the stool to his right, and he looked up from his microtab.

"How much fuel do you need?" was his greeting, in his melodic Arazoni accent. Melina relaxed. This was how she preferred things. Direct and to the point, no messing about with pleasantries and politeness. This was space. Nobody had time for that.

“It’s a Dalmatia-class shuttle,” Melina told him, waving for service. “She was running on fumes when I pulled in here.”

“What’s your course?”

“Stilbon. Full speed.”

A bartender came over, one of Fortitude’s few permanent residents, and Melina placed her order. No food—no time. Just a soft drink. Astro establishments didn’t care much for Federal age laws on serving alcohol, but pilots knew better than to drink and fly. Most of them, anyway.

“Stilbon?” Gareth snorted. “Rather you than me. Their immigration system’s a nightmare. Longer queues than for the head here when they put spice in the stew.”

“I’m planning to arrive late evening, local time,” Melina said. Her drink arrived, and she took a sip, using her microtab to pay. “Will that make a difference?”

“Maybe,” Gareth said. “It’s a while since I last had to go down there. You’re better off asking Adriana, I think I saw her around.”

“Will do.”

Gareth put his microtab away and leaned on the bar, chin on his hand. “If I’m lending you fuel money, do I get the story? Last we spoke, you didn’t have a ship yet.”

Melina took another sip of her drink. The biting citrus made her chapped lips sting. “I need to get to my mother. They’re putting her on trial in Trivers.”

Her grip tightened around the composite tumbler. She hadn’t had to say it before—with his connections, even Kaleb had known before she had.

Gareth frowned. “Which one? And why?”

“Nefeli,” Melina said. “The medic, not the one with the bar. Counter-Smuggling Act.”

Gareth whistled through his teeth.

“She’s innocent,” Melina quickly added. Drug smugglers were the scourge of the System, the reason for the unending queues at Stilboni immigration, and why Astros were treated with suspicion when they made it to the front. “We’ve got evidence. Little inventory robot turned up at the bar with a recording of the whole thing. I’m taking it to court to clear her name.”

Gareth digested this. “Well, good luck with it. I mean it.”

“Thanks,” Melina said.

“You’re a great pilot,” Gareth went on. “You’ll make it. Just need that fuel, right?”

Melina matched his smile. “Right.”

“When did you get the shuttle, anyway?” Gareth asked. “I thought you weren’t in the market yet.”

“It’s borrowed,” Melina said. “From an old friend.” Close enough. “Kaleb sorted it.”

Gareth nodded and twiddled a carabiner. “How is Kaleb?”

“Fine,” Melina said. She finished her drink, willing Gareth to change the subject.

“You sure you’re okay with leaving him?” Gareth paused, then corrected himself. “Is *he* okay with it?”

Melina drummed her nails against the countertop. “Doesn’t matter. I’m leaving. He knows it; he’s always known it. He’ll cope. It’s not like we’re in love or anything.”

“It’s not that simple, and you know it,” Gareth said. “Ask Wilhelm. Caused a right mess when he left his girlfriend to come out here, and he hasn’t been home since. From what you’ve told me, I don’t see how you and Kaleb are so different. You don’t have to be ‘in love’ or whatever to love each other.”

Melina appreciated the concern, but this wasn't a conversation she wanted to be having. "I didn't come here for relationship advice."

Gareth looked unoffended. "I'm just saying, don't underestimate how hard it'll be when it comes down to it." He sat up and scratched his neck. "You've got some sort of relationship going on there. Doesn't have to be some grand romance to make keeping it going, or ending it, hard. Look, why don't you take him on as crew, or find him a job at a station or something? Lessen the distance, if you guys don't think you'll be able to cope with it."

Melina laughed humourlessly. "Not going to happen. Kaleb living in space would be like you and I trying to live at the bottom of a lake. He's not made for it." And she would never ask him to try, just as she hadn't asked him to come to Stilbon. It would be selfish, and in the end, it would only hurt them both.

"And that," Gareth said, sliding Melina's discarded tumbler back to the bartender, "is why there aren't many couples in space. Not that I'm complaining; I like it that way."

A lot of Astros did. Unless you flew on the same ship, relationships were generally unworkable in space, so the spacefaring lifestyle attracted the kind of person who didn't have those interests. Kaleb had special words for people like that, but Melina didn't go in for them. Being an Astro covered everything that needed covering, for her.

"I'll get you that fuel," Gareth said, getting to his feet. "No need to repay me. No doubt I'll need a favour from you at some point in the next fifty years."

"Thank you, Gareth," Melina said. "Seriously. I won't forget this."

Gareth waved her off. “Just tell me you’ll give a bit more consideration to you and Kaleb before you leave Yereen, okay? He sounds like a rebel—I like that. Don’t break his heart. Or yours, either. Work something out.”

“I hear you,” Melina said. She led the way out of the canteen, heading for the fuel office.

Life in space was easier for her, in many ways, than life on Yereen. She’d seen that through Kaleb. Up here, there were no questions about who she was dating, no jibes about when she and Kaleb were going to get married, no lewd comments when she worked a bar shift in one of his shirts. No Astro would ever mistake friendship for flirting, with all the awkwardness that followed. Those friendships formed more easily, which was why, Kaleb aside, they were the only ones she had.

The only thing that wasn’t easier was Kaleb. Her and Kaleb. Gareth was right. Kaleb had no future in space, and Melina had never had a future on the ground. Loving relationships were loving relationships, no matter what they looked like, and she hadn’t heard of many surviving that kind of separation. There was no reason to think that she and Kaleb would be any different.

Melina would keep her promise to Gareth, to consider everything before she acted. But she wouldn’t consider it yet. Let them get to Stilbon. Let them finish this task. Let them get her mother home, where she belonged. With her safe, Melina might have the strength in her heart to deal with the prospect of losing someone else she loved.

## Chapter Seven

Measuring time in space was tricky. Alongside the weirdness of relativity and shifting time zones, it was constantly night. Some cruise liners ran lighting cycles that shifted their passengers' circadian rhythms to lessen space-lag, but other ships didn't bother. Darkness on a public ferry was a bad idea, and pilots and crews had little use for time zones. Service stations and spaceports were always open: Astros could keep their own hours.

Once they had all made it back onto the refuelled *Parisian* and departed Fortitude, Melina's microtab showed that back home in Liberty, Denis would be calling time in Estelle's bar. Melina hoped he'd found her note, explaining their absence and asking him not to contact her mother. She didn't want to give the family hope, in case they failed to make it to Stilbon in time.

Their course was set, with no errant asteroids forecast along the route. Melina had deemed it safe to leave the cockpit for a while. A little socialisation might distract her from the many things she wished to be distracted from, but she looked unlikely to get it. Reiko was fixated on her microtab, while Tex was busy glaring at a ramen-shovelling Kaleb with the kind of haughty indignation only a Stilboni could summon. Flak had gone into standby mode and plugged itself into the wall to charge, though it would have been difficult to socialise with what was, essentially, an inanimate object.

Melina stuck a compostable spork into her own ramen pouch and perched on the kitchenette. "How did you find the station?" she asked nobody in particular.

"Good," Kaleb said, between mouthfuls. Tex stayed silent.

"Reiko?" Melina prompted. Her cousin glanced up from her microtab, and Melina repeated the question.

“It was fun,” Reiko said. “Kaleb got me this data card about space exploration. It’s so good. You should check it out, it looks way more interesting than the boring flying you’ve been doing.”

Melina took the jibe with an inward smile. Reiko definitely wasn’t cut out for piloting, but at least now she was showing an interest in something other than rap videos. That was encouraging.

“Did you say thank you?” she asked.

Before Reiko could answer, Tex scoffed. “Why should she? He stole it.”

Melina was neither surprised, nor disappointed. She knew which shop on Fortitude sold data cards. It built its business on flogging worthless junk to clueless tourists at an obscene mark-up. That shop was proof that those who made their living in space may be Astro by name, but not necessarily by nature. She’d complained about it to Kaleb in the past, so he knew they could take the hit from one measly data card.

She ate some ramen while trying to formulate a response that would neither annoy Kaleb, nor suggest to the impressionable twelve-year-old sitting beside him that stealing was okay.

The delay wasn’t good enough for Tex, who added, “He stole somebody’s microtab, too.”

Hot noodles burned Melina’s throat. “You did what now?”

“Relax,” Kaleb hastened to say, putting his ramen pouch down on the table. “There was a guy harassing the person on the information desk, clearly Stilboni from the obnoxious amount of yellow, trying to throw his money around like grass in the wind. His microtab was sticking out of his pocket so I nabbed it when he went off in a huff. Nobody saw me.”

He lifted his left hip and contorted to pull a fancy microtab case from his back pocket. That it looked to be made of real leather, which Melina didn't get to see often, gave weight to his story. Kaleb flicked it open—empty.

"I pulled the 'tab out and handed it in to security," Kaleb explained. "Told them I found it dumped in one of those potted trees they've got everywhere. He can get it back. I just thought he deserved to be messed with a bit, teach him not to take helpful people for granted."

"Don't act so morally superior," Tex said. "You kept the case."

"Trust me," Kaleb told him, "he can afford a new one."

"It's still stealing."

"Your point?"

"It's against the law."

Kaleb shrugged. "Oh well."

"Oh well?" Tex repeated, incredulous. "Hasn't this trip shown you how important the law is?" He pointed at Melina. "The law is the only reason any of us are here."

Reiko had finally found something worth casting aside her microtab for. Conversely, Melina went back to her ramen so she wouldn't be expected to contribute.

"All it's shown me," Kaleb said, "is that Stilboni laws don't care about anyone who wasn't born on their precious planet."

"That's—"

"If you say that's not true, I will hit you," Kaleb told Tex. "Yeah, you're definitely one of them, but you grew up on Yereen. You cannot possibly be that stupid. I know you've studied the law, but do you know who gets to make it?" He didn't wait for an

answer. “Stilbonis. Stilbonis make the law, and then they tell the rest of us that we have to follow it. No thanks.”

“You still get a say,” Tex argued. “Everyone does.”

“Mate,” Reiko interrupted, “even I know those elections are rigged.”

Kaleb inclined his head to Reiko. “She’s right.”

“It’s immaterial,” Tex said, unable to counter the fact that Yereen’s representatives in the Federal government had always had Stilboni connections.

“Stealing is still immoral.”

“I stole his microtab case,” Kaleb said. “If I was being immoral, I’d have stolen his microtab, too. He won’t miss the case, will probably have a new one by morning, but me?” He shook the case in the air. “If I sell this, I could afford to feed my family for a *month*.”

“I’m not defending inequality,” Tex said to Kaleb’s derision. “All I’m saying is that there are laws, and breaking them has penalties.”

Kaleb cackled. “Oh, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” His lip curled in a most un-Kaleb-like manner, and disgust filled his tone. “Look at you, having a go at me for breaking the tiniest, most inconsequential little law. You utter hypocrite.”

Tex stared at him. Melina discarded her empty ramen pouch and spork in the small composter beside her. Reiko sat forwards, biting her thumbnail, engrossed.

“No,” Tex said simply—calmly. He blinked slowly, and something about his posture lightened, like the *Parisian’s* artificial gravity had failed for him alone. “The only hypocrite, Kaleb, is you. Funny how much you seem to like the law when it benefits you.”

“Tex,” Kaleb warned. Melina suppressed a shiver.

Tex got up from the table, avoiding Kaleb's wild attempt to pull him back. "I've had enough."

"Tex," Kaleb said again, more urgently.

"Shut up," Tex told him.

Tex turned to Melina, eyes unyielding iron in the shadow of his green fringe. "Obviously, this is my aunt's ship," he told her. "Rhiannon's been forcing me to help her with her business since I was twelve." Tex inhaled, giving Kaleb time to voice a third warning. It went unheeded. "Last year, Kaleb found out that that business is smuggling drugs, and he's been threatening to turn us both in to the Federal authorities if I don't do exactly as he says. For example, lending him the *Parisian*."

He clasped his hands behind his back and nodded to both Melina and Reiko, who looked perversely like the solstice had arrived six months early. "Now you know. Both of you." He turned back to Kaleb. "Thought I'd take a leaf out of your book. If you want to tell the Feds, cling to those laws you claim to hate so much, go ahead. Do what you like. I'm not doing this anymore."

Kaleb paled but said nothing. His face became a concrete wall.

Reiko appraised him with the dirtiest look but spoke with an undercurrent of glee. "You were blackmailing him? *Wow*."

For Melina, there was static. This was too much. Yes, she'd known in her heart that whatever was going on between Kaleb and Tex, whatever had brought her this ship, wasn't anything good. There was a reason she hadn't wanted details—this trip was too important for doubts. But *blackmail*? Over drug smuggling?

"Are you telling me," she began, not fully believing her own words as they exited her mouth, "that this ship has been involved in drug smuggling?" The worst Federal crime. The crime that her mother, her innocent mother, was potentially facing

several years' incarceration for only being tangentially associated with. "The ship in which we are currently travelling to Stilbon, which has the strictest immigration procedures in the entire System?"

Kaleb didn't reply, but Tex did. "Yes."

At least Tex had the grace to look apologetic, and it wasn't really his fault, not if he'd been blackmailed into it. Melina could see the realisation of how much trouble they were potentially facing dawning on Reiko, but Kaleb remained a statue. A statue would have been easier to read. He certainly wasn't looking sorry. But if he had been, would it have been for his actions, or because Tex had put an end to the affair?

She decided to ignore him. She had never been furious with Kaleb before. She had to ignore him, because she was the pilot, and this stupid ship and every stupid person on it were her responsibility.

"Tex," Melina said, trying to keep her voice level. "Please could you take a watch in the cockpit for me, so I can get some sleep? It'll only be for a few hours. Just keep an eye on things and wake me if you need to."

Tex hesitated. "Now?"

"Now," Melina confirmed.

Tex took one step towards the cockpit, then another. Momentum gained, he walked past the inert Flak to the door, and went through without a word.

With him gone, Melina turned to Reiko. "All of this stays between us, okay? Not a word to anyone. Otherwise, we could all be in serious trouble." Kaleb especially, if the Feds discovered he'd had this information for months without sharing it. The sentence for that would make the one hanging over Nefeli look like a short holiday.

Reiko nodded, sober. Melina offered her hand, and Reiko got up and took it. Melina started to lead her towards the door to the hallway, and the cabins beyond. If

she ransacked them thoroughly, would she find some of Rhiannon's merchandise?

Was that why Tex had been so eager to do the inventory?

"Lee," Kaleb murmured from somewhere behind her.

"Don't."

She entered the hallway, pushing Reiko ahead of her, glad when the door shut behind them. Her conversation with Gareth, hours yet decades ago, came back to her. Everything would be so much easier if she didn't love Kaleb. Everything.

She needed to rest. Then, to fly. Then, get Flak to the court, and clear her mother of offences that two of her travelling companions, it transpired, were guilty of. Then, maybe if she succeeded, and Nefeli went home to Estelle and the family, Melina might be able to forget about how they were able to do it.

## Chapter Eight

Something about hurtling through space at half the speed of light was calming, to Tex's surprise. Whenever Rhiannon had dragged him out on the shuttle, it had always been to the soundtrack of strange techno-folk music she'd picked up from too many runs to the planet Sylva. Hard to feel calm with that in his ears, and Rhiannon in the seat beside him.

Tex transferred from the co-pilot's chair to the pilot's. It was virtually identical, only with different controls in its orbit and a slightly altered perspective of the void outside. Sitting there, he felt as if at any moment Rhiannon would come in and turf him out with an earful. It was also daunting: the seat somehow too large, the controls too delicate and easily misused.

He returned to his original seat, the cracked leatherette body-warmed and familiar. There was the incongruous blue knob he'd replaced on the dashboard last month; there was the hole he'd slit in the armrest years ago, that Rhiannon had never noticed. Tex slid his little finger under the worn fabric and over the wax-sheathed razor blade.

Rhiannon wasn't the only one who knew how to hide things. When she'd dragged twelve-year-old Tex onto the *Parisian* for the first time, he'd wanted to be prepared. If they had been caught, his father's razor blade wouldn't have helped him against the authorities any more than his fledgling legal trivia, but it had made him feel better.

He would have been Reiko's age, then. That horrified him. Reiko pretended to be tough, but the thought of her needing a weapon like a comfort blanket was repulsive. The idea of her being pushed into a situation where she might have to wield one was worse still.

The cockpit door hissed open. Tex quickly smoothed over the hole in the armrest and sat up straight.

“Hey.” Melina sank into the pilot’s seat like it had been crafted for her personally. “Did I miss anything?”

Tex shook his head. “Nothing.”

The hours of his watch had passed slowly and uneventfully, but not once had he felt himself at risk of falling asleep. He wasn’t in the mood for sleep. Too much adrenaline. Too many thoughts.

Melina hummed and began checking readouts and systems. Now that she was there, Tex could retreat to his cabin. Melina’s request for him to take a watch had been surprising, but he had welcomed the escape route, and now was strangely reluctant to leave. Melina didn’t tell him to go, so he sat with her in silence, broken now and then by beeps and chimes from the dashboard. It should have been uncomfortable, but it wasn’t. Melina had a ship to fly, and Tex had the universe beyond the windows. The promise that somewhere, things were better.

“I’m sorry,” Melina said. “About Kaleb.”

Tex glanced over. She was cross-referencing coordinates between the navigation system and a real-time map on her expanded microtab.

“Don’t be,” he said. “We’re all responsible for our own actions.” He turned back to the stars, but conflict within himself lessened their appeal.

“I have to take some of the blame,” Melina said, over the soft tapping of fingertips against a screen. “I told him to get me a ship.”

“He didn’t have to pick this one,” Tex said, not bothering to disguise his resentment.

“And I didn’t have to take it,” Melina said. Tex couldn’t pick up one shred of emotion in her voice, or in the way she continued checking their course. Maybe that’s what had drawn Kaleb to her in the first place. The attraction of someone he couldn’t instantly read.

“I’m not blind to how Kaleb can act sometimes,” Melina continued, correcting their course by a point of a degree. “You two hate each other. I knew there was no way you’d offer Kaleb anything, least of all someone else’s ship, no matter who or what it was for. I just didn’t want to think about it, and that’s no excuse.” An icon on the screen flashed a positive Yereenite green.

The tang of iron washed over Tex’s tongue as he gnawed the inside of his cheek, a habit he’d never grown out of. When had someone last offered him an apology? Not a polite courtesy, but a genuine, personal apology?

It didn’t feel good. Not in these circumstances.

“You had other things on your mind,” Tex said. Stilbon, and Flak, and her mother’s trial. She’d needed a ship, and one had appeared before her. Could anyone blame her for not questioning it too deeply?

That made it worse. That need. It seemed exploitative, and wrong, that Melina had been lumbered with a ship mired in the very criminality that her mother was falsely accused of. Even if that was Kaleb’s fault, Tex bore some of the blame for not speaking up sooner. If he had, she and Flak might have been able to find another route from Fortitude.

“I’m the one who should apologise,” Tex said. “This ship... I shouldn’t have let Kaleb have it. Not for this.”

“Like you said, Kaleb is responsible for his own actions. Did he tell you why I wanted a ship?”

“No,” Tex said truthfully.

“Then let it go,” Melina told him. “Don’t torture yourself. I don’t need that.”

She went back to her microtab, the matter apparently settled. Tex returned his attention to the window. It was hard to make out the distant stars, and impossible to see any planets within those far-off systems.

Federal law only stretched so far. There would be places in the galaxy where no charges could be brought against him, or any of them, perhaps even Rhiannon. Tex glanced again at the pilot’s chair. Shuttle controls were intuitive. In theory, he might be able to fly the *Parisian*. Not easily, not well, but theoretically. Rhiannon had shown him the basics, in case of emergency.

What if, after everyone disembarked on Stilbon, he took the ship? How far could he get?

“You want to leave Yereen,” Tex said quietly. Melina cocked her head. “You *are* leaving Yereen.”

“I like Yereen,” Melina said. “But I’d rather be up here.” She gestured out of the window. “I mean, look at that. Who wouldn’t want that?”

Not Tex. He preferred solid ground—possibly the only thing he and Kaleb would ever agree on. Though the idea of infinity was appealing, as was the knowledge that they were moving so fast, with momentum killable only by fuel loss, entropy, or their own choice. If Tex could, he’d keep going, past Stilbon and even Arazon, and never return to Yereen. He wasn’t sure he had anything to go back to. Only the wrath of Rhiannon, and the weight of his parents’ expectations.

“Will you miss it?” he asked. Melina wasn’t like him. She had family who clearly loved her, and Kaleb. Yet she wanted to leave them all behind.

“Sure,” Melina said. “But it’s not as if I can’t go back whenever I like. I’ll have my own ship. It’d be no different to driving down to my grandparents in the south.”

“What about Kaleb?”

She didn’t answer. Tex might have pushed her good-natured indulgence too far. He crossed his legs, wishing he was still short enough to curl into the seat like Reiko could.

“How much do you know about me and Kaleb?” Melina asked, long after Tex had resigned himself to silence.

“I know that it’s complicated,” Tex said.

Melina made a small sound of humour, though Tex was unsure of its authenticity. “Not complicated,” she corrected. “Just different from what most people expect when you say you’re in a relationship with someone.”

Tex turned his head towards her. “So, you are in a relationship?”

“Yes,” Melina said. She didn’t elaborate.

Ever since Kaleb’s aggressive explanation, if you could call it that, there had been something Tex hadn’t been able to let go of. Something difficult to describe. In some ways, it felt like trying to look at something in his dark bedroom after staring at the screen of his microtab—there in the corner of his eye but vanishing if he tried to focus on it. In other ways, it felt like being on the edge of a gravity well, which if he approached, would pull him down into the unknown.

“Anyway,” Melina said, drawing him out of his thoughts, “it doesn’t matter. Astros don’t do relationships; not with grounders. It just doesn’t work.”

Astros didn’t do relationships. Tex knew that. Everyone knew that. It had contributed to the Astros’ less pleasant nickname, the Aliens, since they lived in space like the little green men of ancient children’s tales.

“What’s that like?” he wondered.

Melina shrugged. “Most of the time you don’t notice it. Everything up here is about who you fly with. Crews are the closest things to families, not that there are many of them. Usually if people are married or something, they’ll fly on the same ship. That’s what matters more than anything. Most of us just fly alone, though.” She glanced at him for the first time since entering the cockpit. “Why do you ask?”

Tex looked away, but the galaxy outside couldn’t help him put his thoughts into words. Not thoughts so abstract that he’d never made sense of them; not words that someone else could understand.

“I think that Stilboni culture is very different,” he began. “Probably the opposite.”

“That’s what you were raised in,” Melina stated.

Tex nodded. “On Stilbon, you have to be in a relationship.” This, at least, was straightforward. “Stilbon is all about success. Being in a relationship is seen as integral to that, so if you’re not...”

He tried a different route. “For an Astro, someone like you, being single is normal. For someone like me, it’s unacceptable. Not unless you can prove you’re successful in other ways, such as having an important career.”

“Like medicine, or law,” Melina observed.

A peculiar sensation like an internal shiver went through Tex. “Yeah,” he managed to say.

Tex was Stilboni. He couldn’t deny it, not to himself. Yes, he’d been born on Yereen, but in his heart, to his core, he was Stilboni. So was his father, one of only two people in the System he could say gave a toss about him. It was a very different world to Yereen, but it was Tex’s world, and unless a Stilboni could be a lawyer, or a

consultant physician, or a top bureaucrat, they couldn't be single. Not if they wanted to be successful. Not unless they wanted to bring shame and scorn on themselves and their family.

It was a career, or a relationship. For Tex, law, or a relationship. Yet he'd stood up to Kaleb. He'd stopped the blackmail. Now, Kaleb was free to go to the authorities if he wanted to—and no doubt Kaleb could find a way to do it without implicating anyone else. That would be the end of Tex's chances of ever becoming a lawyer.

That left a relationship. With Kaleb no longer a meteor directed at his head, Tex found that there was more room in it for clear thinking than he liked. The undefinable something that Kaleb had catalysed seemed suddenly more definable, and worse, it appeared to have been lurking buried in Tex's subconscious all along.

Tex had been in a relationship—only one, no matter what he might have let Kaleb think. Adrian.

It still hurt to think about. For a while, it had been great. Everything Tex had wanted. Because he'd never not wanted a relationship: he'd wanted love, he'd wanted what his parents had. He still did.

He'd liked Adrian, and Adrian had liked him, somehow, and maybe it had been more love than like. Tex's parents had been delighted. Then the inevitable had happened. Adrian had wanted sex, and Tex had said no; and Adrian had asked why, and Tex hadn't had an answer. Not one that made sense. He wasn't waiting for anything. He wasn't apprehensive. He simply didn't want to do that. Not with Adrian, or another guy. Not with a woman.

Not with anyone.

As far as Adrian had been concerned, that had been the end of that. The end of Tex's one and only relationship. If that relationship had seemed so perfect, and Tex had screwed it up, what hope did he have for another chance?

So, it was law, or nothing. Now, thanks to Kaleb, it was nothing, and that was the true reason why Tex had gone along with the blackmail for so long. That was the truth of it, not wanting to help his parents, or flee Rhiannon. It was too late to switch to medicine, and he was too Yereenite to be a bureaucrat, so law had been his only chance at success. With that chance snatched away, he would fail. Fail his parents, fail as a Stilboni, and thus, fail himself.

Yet Kaleb had talked about Melina. Loving her, but not in the way Tex had expected. Using the sort of segregating words that Stilboni culture disapproved of, words of division, words that in Kaleb's tone had somehow evoked belonging. Concepts that had sparked that awful, wonderful something in Tex's brain. Something he knew. Something he'd always known, but could not comprehend.

Melina broke him from his reverie. "You should go and get some sleep."

Tex blinked. The cockpit lights were gentle, the noise of the console reassuring. The star-spattered darkness outside had befriended him with its promises of eternal onward motion, and infinite discovery.

"Do you mind if I sleep here?" he asked.

Theoretically, the ship was his. He could sleep where he liked, but it was best not to annoy the pilot. Especially when he may already have caused her so much undeserved trouble and hurt, and she had offered him only patient kindness. If she wanted him gone, he would go. He would understand.

"That's fine," Melina said. "I don't mind."

## Chapter Nine

A bottle of anti-sickness medication had awaited Kaleb on the small cupboard beside his bunk that morning. If it was morning—in Liberty, it was past noon, and in Trivers, the Stilboni capital, it would be evening. The night before the trial.

Melina must have left it for him, though Kaleb hadn't heard her enter in the night, remarkably. Sleep had been slippery. On waking, he had sat for a full five minutes, turning the translucent amber container in his hands, the rattle of the tablets within not as soothing as the rain the noise resembled. Melina had thought of him, despite everything. Gratitude had only deepened Kaleb's guilt.

He should never have blackmailed Tex. He knew that. Yet after everything Tex had done to him all those years ago, all the hell Kaleb had been put through, hadn't Kaleb deserved some form of revenge? Hadn't Tex deserved the punishment that no adult had ever given him?

Now that everything was unravelling, those justifications sounded weak. Childish: something he would patronise Reiko for, and Melina would condemn. Melina had always shown him the truth of himself. It had never hurt before.

He loved her. He would do anything for her. She had needed a ship, and there had been the *Parisian*, and he hadn't thought twice about it. Helping Melina, acquitting Nefeli, and dealing retribution against Tex in one stroke? It hadn't taken any thought at all, and that was the Earth-damned problem. A drug smuggler's ship, for a journey to Stilbon, to free an alleged abettor of drug smuggling.

Kaleb had screwed up. He had screwed up massively.

He'd taken one of the tablets, in the end. It had been easier to swallow. Sitting now behind Melina in the cockpit, straps overly snug across his chest, Kaleb was pleased that he had. Space travel wasn't the only thing that could make him nauseous.

“Switching off half-light in three, two, one—”

Melina pushed up the orange lever between the front seats, and the straps dug further into Kaleb’s chest as the ship gradually decelerated with the help of thrusters on the bow. The windows showed nothing except blank space, distant winks of stars, and one shadowed crescent of moon. Nobody spoke. Tex looked half-asleep, eyelids sliding closed every so often. He’d been in the cockpit when Kaleb had arrived, and had left only briefly to use the head. If he’d been there all night, alone with Melina, then Kaleb would have given anything to know what they’d talked about.

In the co-pilot’s seat, Reiko was again glued to her microtab. She shifted, and Kaleb saw a distorted map of the Orion arm of the Milky Way, the first frontier of human deep space exploration.

“Entering the funnel lane now,” Melina said, without a shred of apprehension.

Outside, blinking orange buoys formed the wide opening of a gently tapering space lane, at least four times the size of the funnel lane above Yereen. The reason for the large scale soon became apparent, as a freighter bigger than Kaleb’s entire street drew up beside them, and Melina brought the *Parisian* into line behind a glimmering midnight blue yacht. Yereen would be lucky to see that much traffic in a whole day, and there was plenty more of it.

Melina made a sound of displeasure and flicked several switches on the dashboard. “That hull colour needs to be banned.” She gestured at the yacht. “They’re supposed to have extra lights for visibility, but apparently it ruins the aesthetic. We’re coming up on a patrol—they’ll turn those lights on now, you watch.”

If Melina was at all concerned about the patrol, her disdain for dangerous piloting masked it well. Four tiny two-person patrol craft hovered in a circle around the funnel lane, reminding Kaleb of the moths that plagued Liberty in the summer months.

“Are they immigration?” Reiko asked.

“No,” Melina said. “Just traffic patrol.”

They approached the ring of patrol craft. As Melina had predicted, the yacht in front switched on its hull lighting strips. Melina guided the *Parisian* through the ring, and Kaleb spotted the official symbol of the Liber Federation emblazoned on the sides and underbelly of the nearest craft: six interlocking black circles within an orange sixteen-pointed star. One circle for each planet, and each of equal size. That was all the equality those worlds were getting.

A small space station came into view, and they were still far enough from Stilbon itself that it almost eclipsed the planet entirely. Only Stilbon’s left-hand edge peeked out from behind the silvery ball. From space, Stilbon already looked markedly different to Yereen. Stilbon’s verdant green was dappled with the blue of oceans and rivers, while Yereen lived up to its name: the pale yellow-green of savannah bordering the orange equatorial desert.

The cockpit speakers crackled. “Dalmatia-class shuttle, please proceed to checkpoint two-beta,” an artificial voice said. “Prepare to provide licence details and immigration data.”

Melina flew the ship left after the space station. The yacht they’d been trailing veered right, into what seemed to be an express lane. The freighter, now behind them, continued in a straight line.

“They’ll have scanned our registration,” Melina said, somehow sounding calm. It could be a pilot thing, though Melina was very skilled at hiding her emotions. “If anything flags up, we’ll soon find out.”

It wasn’t far to checkpoint two-beta, which turned out to be a collection of buoys, flashing the Stilboni green of caution.

“Should they be green?” Kaleb had to ask. His throat felt scratchy.

“Green’s fine,” Melina said. “It means wait. They’ll turn orange once we’re cleared to land.” She hesitated—only for a split second, but enough to catch Kaleb’s notice. “Otherwise, they’ll flash blue.”

Emboldened by Melina’s lack of hostility, Kaleb peered around her at the green buoys. “Would we be able to fly straight anyway, if that happened?”

“That’s what the patrol ships are for, idiot,” Reiko said, pointing out of the window.

The *Parisian* banked slightly, and Kaleb saw what Reiko had. Five patrol ships, one more than they’d encountered earlier, all heading in their direction.

“It’ll be fine,” Melina said. Yet despite sounding confident, she didn’t reengage the forward jets that would kill their momentum. They drifted ever closer to the gap between the buoys, like a fish riding a current.

The radio came to life again, though this time the voice was human, with the clipped notes of a Stilboni accent. “Shuttle *Parisian*, this is Stilboni immigration.” Kaleb sincerely hoped that it was only his imagination that those patrol craft were getting closer. “A shuttle matching your description and registration is flagged for suspected criminal activity. Please advise.”

Even with the anti-sickness medication, Kaleb’s stomach turned over.

“What does that mean?” Reiko whispered, though they couldn’t be heard.

“They’re giving us a chance to prove our innocence,” Tex said gravely. Clearing his throat helped the rasp in his voice, but not his pallor. The light in the cockpit was warm, but he resembled a corpse. “There are Stilbonis in the scrap business. For all they know, we may have recently and legitimately acquired the ship, without updating the registration data.”

“Can we tell them that?” Reiko asked.

“No,” Melina and Tex said in unison. Melina’s focus lay straight ahead, on the night sky outside. Kaleb couldn’t see her expression, but he could see the minute tapping of her left thumb against the top of the control joystick.

“We have no proof,” Tex explained.

“Shuttle *Parisian*, please respond,” the radio requested.

Melina didn’t move. Noticing this, Reiko reached over and flipped the switch to broadcast.

“Hi,” Reiko said. “Sorry, we’re just looking for the...” She looked intensely at Melina, then at Tex, who mouthed something to her. “The invoice of our purchase. We just bought this ship and it’s hard to find stuff. Sorry.”

She ended the broadcast and hissed at Kaleb with a dark glare. “This is your mess. Think of something.”

Kaleb had nothing. Reiko was right, this was his mess, but he had absolutely no idea how to get them out of it. He wasn’t made for space, or for questions of law. He couldn’t help.

Reiko had bought them time, but she could do no more. She was a kid. Kaleb glanced at Tex, whose hands covered his face, and realised that it was all on Melina.

Kaleb took several measured breaths. They had to get Flak to the trial. They had to clear Nefeli’s name. And most of all, they had to get out of there. Kaleb could see only one way of doing that, and by Earth and Mars and Sol he hated it, but if anyone could pull it off, it was Melina Odessa.

She may no longer trust him, but he would always trust her.

Taking one last breath, giving the others one last chance to offer a better plan, he leaned forward as far as he could to speak firmly and clearly into Melina’s ear.

“Fly.”

He sensed her take a deep breath of her own, and fell back into his seat.

Her thumb had never left the joystick, not once. She’d paid no attention to the radio, given no reaction to the news of the warrant against the ship. Melina was a pilot. She was an Astro. This was her domain, and her area of expertise. She’d anticipated this, and she’d planned for it, and Kaleb knew what that plan was, just as he knew that all she had been waiting for was their permission.

Reiko had heard him speak. He glanced at her, and she nodded. “Do it.”

“Tex?” Melina asked, and Kaleb found, for the very first time, that no swell of anger accompanied her address of him.

“Go,” Tex said, from behind his hands.

The Stilboni authorities on the radio again demanded an adequate response, but Melina’s right hand already hovered over the dashboard, ready to boost the engines. “This won’t be pleasant,” she warned.

“I’d gathered,” Kaleb said. Reiko snorted.

The sudden acceleration took the wind out of him. A blue glow from the buoys filled the windows, but the *Parisian* had already shot between them.

“Reiko, keep an eye on the proximity sensors,” Melina said hurriedly. “They’re going to chase us. The computer will identify them automatically; just tell me how many there are, and shout if any turn red.”

“What does that mean?” Reiko asked, as the *Parisian* made a wide banking turn.

“That they’re right on top of us.”

The ship kept turning in a huge arc, back towards the funnel lane and the space station. Kaleb feared that his anti-sickness medication was wearing off prematurely.

“Five ships on the screen,” Reiko said—and there they were, visible out of the main cockpit window, coming straight at them.

At great speed. Kaleb opened his mouth enough to swear, but at the last possible moment, Melina hauled the *Parisian* into a climb and soared over the patrol craft.

“They’re chasing us,” Reiko warned.

The diminutive space station grew larger. Beyond it, so did the four patrol craft from traffic duty.

“Those are Wasp-class ships,” Melina said. “Their controls aren’t very responsive, so they don’t have the same manoeuvrability as us. Hang on, I’m going to try to lose them.”

Inexplicably, the *Parisian* decelerated, and Kaleb watched on the dashboard screen as the dots of their pursuers began to catch up.

“Two just went red,” Reiko said, chewing her lip. “Three.”

Melina swung the ship into another turn, this one much tighter, and closed in on the space station. The *Parisian* cut so near to its hull that Kaleb glimpsed the individual rivets and welds as they slingshot around it and back towards the tailing patrol craft, this time with the traffic in the funnel lane a barrier between them.

They plunged in amongst the other shuttles and freighters, weaving in and out of gaps that should have been too small for them. Kaleb wanted to shut his eyes, but he was compelled to watch, heart thudding in his ears, convinced they would crash.

“One of the lights just vanished,” Reiko said, alarmed, as they swooped beneath a dirty ferry. “It didn’t drop off the screen. It vanished.”

Melina said nothing. Neither did Kaleb, but he tasted bile. They might be Feds. They might be Stilbonis. But they were people.

“Lee?” Reiko asked, sounding much younger than twelve. Kaleb willed her to let it go.

“Patrol ships like these are relatively flimsy,” Melina said distractedly. “Takes barely anything to knock one out; I know someone who used to fly one. They’re basically reinforced escape pods with engines grafted on, cheap as sand grains.”

“So the pilot will be okay?”

“Absolutely fine.”

She seemed unoffended by Reiko’s question. Kaleb wondered if she should have been. For his part, he felt ashamed that he could ever have thought, even for a moment, that Melina could be capable of killing.

“Two more lights gone,” Reiko said, tone normal but for nerves, as they slid sideways between a freighter and a marker buoy.

“So six left?” Melina asked.

“Yeah.”

The *Parisian* dived away from the traffic, into the express lane that the midnight-blue yacht had taken. The yacht was gone, but two more patrol craft hovered nearby.

“Now what?” Kaleb asked, able to breathe now that they weren’t in imminent danger of a fatal collision. “We’ve lost three, but we’re about to gain two more.”

“We head for the planet,” Melina said. “They won’t follow us. Those ships wouldn’t survive re-entry: they keep them docked on one of the moons. The biggest problem will be the defensive satellites.”

“The what?”

“Guns,” Tex said. “Orbiting the planet.”

“Why does Stilbon have guns in geostationary orbit?” Kaleb demanded, perplexed.

“They’re left over from the old days of piracy,” Tex said cautiously. “They’re ancient, but they work. Shouldn’t do much damage, though, not after this long.”

“Awesome,” Reiko deadpanned.

Melina guided the *Parisian* closer to the planet, until Kaleb could see nothing outside but swirls of white and blue and luscious green. “I’m turning off artificial gravity,” she said. “Make sure your restraints are secure, and don’t have your tongue between your teeth. This will be rough.”

Kaleb checked his straps, then checked them again as gravity disappeared and he rose slightly out of his seat. Immediately after, he was flung back into it again as the ship banked away from a satellite, following Stilbon’s latitudinal curvature. “Is that a good satellite or a bad satellite?”

The answer came in the swift form of a judder as something impacted against the hull, and in the ensuing alarm.

“Still three on our tail,” Reiko said. “And something else is flashing red, but it’s not big enough to be a ship.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Melina said through gritted teeth.

Another impact. Kaleb tensed, and jumped at every one that followed, until Reiko’s shouted reports over shrill alarms scarcely registered.

Only Melina’s voice made it through to him. “Beginning re-entry. Hang on.”

Something creaked below the trilling cacophony. The *Parisian*’s hull skimmed the upper atmosphere, then broke it, the ship shaking violently, nothing like their gentle glide down to the surface of Fortitude, or the smooth descent of that public ferry all those years ago. The dashboard was already a kaleidoscope of red and orange,

but now an even brighter scarlet glow filled the windows. Then, much too quickly—something green.

“Brace for impact,” someone yelled, and it had to be Melina, but Kaleb couldn’t say for sure. His eyes were screwed shut, and his ears were ringing. The shaking had transferred from the bench to his bones, the beads of his braids bashing against the taut skin of his face. His mouth was dry, but he tasted blood. They were going to die. Surely, they were going to die.

And it would be his fault.

## Chapter Ten

The hour was late, but the air was still dusty and hot, an insidious and unfamiliar humidity that had Tex pulling off his buttoned shirt as the thin t-shirt beneath stuck to his skin. He tied it sloppily around his waist, hands trembling, and stumbled across the uneven ground, favouring his left ankle.

The edge of the drought-beleaguered field they had come down in was lined with spiky pear bushes. Kaleb was vomiting into one, on his hands and knees in the dirt. Tex came to a halt nearby and turned back to survey the damage.

Like the arrow it had resembled, the *Parisian's* bow was embedded in churned-up soil, brown filth obscuring the cockpit windows. The starboard door Tex had exited out of was almost level with the ground—the landing gear had never deployed. Melina had brought them down like an ancient glider, using the lower thrusters to slow their speed. A long trail of scorch marks stretched out behind the ship's stern. Luckily, the only vegetation around was the bushes, and their water retention properties made them fairly inflammable.

Reiko emerged from the wreckage. The first to recover from the crash, she'd bolted from her seat even faster than Kaleb. It was clear now that she'd gone to release Flak from the empty crate in the cargo hold in which Melina had stowed it, in case of a Stilboni customs inspection. The robot trailed behind Reiko, a bit bashed and dented, but seemingly in working order.

Tex beckoned them away from the wreckage. The *Parisian's* fuel tanks were in its belly, protected by hull plating that had been dragged along the ground. A leak could cause a sizeable explosion.

"What's so funny?" Reiko asked, approaching him.

He was laughing, Tex realised. Now that he knew, it was hard to stop.

The shuttle was totalled. No landing gear. Shredded undercarriage. One tapered wing snapped halfway off, part of the tailfin missing. Tex's last look at the dashboard before its screen had gone offline had shown one of the engines to be catastrophically damaged. The *Parisian* was a pile of scrap. Totally un-flyable.

They had destroyed Rhiannon's ship. Never had something been so hysterically hilarious and horrifying.

With a loud groan, the cargo access door opened. It swung to the side, but its hinges couldn't take the weight. The door sheared off, landing with a thud in a cloud of dust. Through it came the sound of coughing.

"Lee?" Reiko called, squinting.

Melina appeared, hands fanning in a futile attempt to keep dust out of her face. "Is everyone okay?"

"I'm fine," Reiko said. "Flak too. Tex is having a laughing fit, and Kaleb's throwing up."

Behind them, Kaleb continued retching, but Tex regained control of his faculties.

Melina nodded. Her brown hair had fallen across her face, and when she pushed it back, Tex spied blood on the back of her hand.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine." She joined them, and gazed at the wreck of the *Parisian*, bloodied hand shielding her eyes from the last rays of sunset. When she turned that gaze upon Tex, her expression had changed from weary aggravation to something befitting the intense mourning of a Stilboni funeral. "I'm really sorry, Tex. I should have handled re-entry better, and the landing—"

“Was miraculous,” Tex finished. “We’re alive. I wasn’t sure that we would be. The way you flew was...” He didn’t have words for it. Terrifying? Astonishing? Insane?

“*Amazing*,” Reiko said.

Tex nodded. “Yeah. And it’s not much of a loss. Rhiannon’s been talking about replacing it for years.”

That didn’t put Tex in the clear, if he did return to Yereen. Anyone at the spaceport could tell Rhiannon that Tex had taken her ship. Betrayal by blood kin was not something Rhiannon would take lightly. Tex was on Stilbon, now—it might be for the best that he stayed there.

“She was battered,” Melina conceded, “but she was still a good ship underneath it all. She deserved better.” She tied her hair back, wincing. “The fuel tanks are in one piece, at least, and while the engine damage is irreparable, it’s not dangerous. We should salvage what we can, then get as far away as possible. Darkness will help, and I’ve disabled all communications, but she won’t be hard for the Feds to find.” She wiped her hands on her trousers. “Reiko, Flak, with me. Tex, you’re the Stilbon expert; find us a way to Trivers.”

She shot one pained but otherwise indecipherable look at Kaleb, then returned with Reiko to the ship, Flak following on its caterpillar treads.

Kaleb had moved further along the boundary of the field, and was kneeling with his forehead pillowed on his folded arms. Tex cautiously approached, unsure if he should. Yet Melina was busy, and someone had to.

“You okay?” he asked.

Kaleb shook his head rapidly. Tex shuffled a bit closer, mindful of the woman who had been kicked in the face by an apparently-injured gazelle at last midsummer’s

hunt. Kaleb was saying something, but only when Tex crouched beside him could he hear it.

“I’m sorry,” Kaleb kept repeating. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Tex put a hand in the dirt to keep his balance. There was a tremor in Kaleb’s voice, matching those Tex could see in his shoulders. Walking off and leaving Kaleb to suffer was tempting, but another part of Tex wanted to join him and cry.

“Calm down,” Tex advised awkwardly. “Just... breathe, okay?”

“Okay,” Kaleb managed.

A memory surfaced. The playground at the crèche, Tex towering over Kaleb, sand blown up from the southern desert clinging to their clothes. The first time Tex had seen Kaleb cry. The first time he had made Kaleb cry.

Tex remembered laughing that day, too.

“I’m sorry,” Tex whispered.

Did Kaleb still deserve an apology? After everything that had followed? After he had snapped and turned the tables on Tex, repaying five years of torment with six of hell?

Maybe he did. Tex had been the one to start it. If Tex hadn’t been a bully first, where would they be now? Regardless, Kaleb had apologised. He’d said the words. Tex was damned if he wouldn’t do the same.

“I’m sorry,” Tex repeated, louder.

Kaleb stilled. His breathing stopped, then changed, still shaky but more regular. He lifted his head and began to turn his face towards Tex, and Tex discovered that he really did not want to look at him.

Tex got up, clearing his throat. “The wreckage is safe,” he said. “The others have gone to salvage what they can, then we’re leaving.”

Not giving Kaleb chance to reply, Tex strode off to a break in the line of bushes, framed by rotting wooden gateposts. On the other side ran a rough track, leading left and right to more parched fields. In the distance, Tex spotted what was either an orchard or a forest. It was hard to tell in the fading light.

Blocking out the pain in his ankle, Tex turned right, heading for a low hill that might provide a better view. His microtab could have told him where they were, but like most things, it hadn't made it through the crash in one piece. Gravel crunched—a sure sign that they were far from Stilbon's capital, as most Stilboni roads were known to be paved. The one advantage to the noisy surface was that when the electric car glided towards him without headlights, Tex was able to hear it coming and scramble out of the way.

It was a large SUV with an open bed at the back, the same model used by medics like Nefeli to travel out to small settlements on Yereen. This example was yellow rather than green, but its bodywork was similarly scuffed and dented. It pulled up a few metres down the track, and a skinny blonde woman with a scar across the bridge of her nose stuck her head out of the driver's window.

“Did you come from the crash, honey?” Though they spoke the same language, it was hard to understand her. Her drawling accent was nothing Tex had heard before, certainly not the usual Stilboni manner of speech. He briefly questioned whether they were on the right planet. Whoever this woman was, she clearly wasn't a Fed.

Finding himself separating people into Feds and non-Feds, even subconsciously, was hardly the strangest thing that happened to Tex over the past day, but it still jarred. He didn't like it, but neither did he like the present situation, and could concede that the label had its uses.

“What crash?” Tex asked.

The woman pointedly swept her eyes over his dishevelled appearance. “The shuttle that came down in Zach’s field. Saw it from over yonder, bringing the hens in. Made a right racket.”

Tex kept his expression detached, wondering how Kaleb did it. “And if I did come from the crash?”

She looked at him like he was insane. “Why in the spring tide do you think I drove over here? Honey, if you came from that crash, I’d say you’d be wanting some help, and there ain’t nobody else around right now.”

Tex hadn’t expected this. Stilboni philosophy was every one for themselves. That’s how Tex had been raised, and his father before him. You looked out for yourself, and for your family, and that was it. Strangers could deal with their own problems.

“What kind of help?” Tex asked, suspicious.

The woman sighed at him. “From the way you’re acting, I’m gonna hedge a guess at the not-so-legal kind.” Tex tried not to squirm. It seemed Kaleb wasn’t the only person who could see right through him.

“Look,” she said. “Let me ask you a nice, easy question. If the Feds come down and find that shuttle of yours in Zach’s field, with nobody here to explain, could he be in the slurry tank?”

Tex did not know why she was so concerned with Zach, whoever he was, or the function of a slurry tank, but he could surmise enough. “Possibly,” he predicted.

The woman slapped the door and grinned. “Then the kind of help is whatever you need it to be, honey. Zach could do with some trouble on his patch. Liber knows it’d be good for him and his to have a rooster call over their precious Feds. I’m sick of his fawning over them.”

Finally, something that made sense. The woman's only goal was revenge on someone she disliked. Tex wasn't unfamiliar with the concept, and was unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

"You're not a fan of the Feds?" Tex asked.

"Nah. Most around here ain't. Where you from, stranger?"

Tex hesitated, then decided that it couldn't do much harm. "Yereen."

She tilted her head. "Where the pretty clay comes from, right?" Tex nodded.

"Well, you're a long way from home. I won't bother to fetch you a mechanic; I saw the crash. How about a lift somewhere?"

Excellent. A lesson for Kaleb: blackmail wasn't the only way to win a favour.

"We need to get to Trivers," Tex said. "As soon as possible."

"We?"

"Three others, and a robot."

"That's quite a drive, honey," she said. "I could get you part way?"

"Please," Tex said. Making the trial was important, but more so was getting away from the scene of the crash.

"Okay then," the woman agreed. "But the robot goes in the trunk, you hear? Hate the damn things. Can't trust them."

"Thank you," Tex said. "Thank you, really."

"I hear you." The car door opened and the woman got out. She was nearly as tall as Tex, and dressed similarly. "Call me Santiago." She shut the door and led the way back to the crash site.

Kaleb was now on his back, staring up at the darkening lilac sky. Reiko sat by his head, eating a spiky pear. Red juice dripped onto her poncho.

"Where's Melina?" Tex asked, as Santiago whistled at the wrecked *Parisian*.

“On the ship with Flak,” Reiko said. “Who’s this?”

Tex explained about Santiago’s SUV. “She’s agreed to get us part way to Trivers.”

“Hold up,” Santiago cut in, eyeing Reiko. “Where are your parents? Is Melina your mama?”

Reiko shook her head. “My parents are in Trivers.”

“Then we’re going to Trivers,” Santiago stated.

Tex was ready to question her change of heart, until he noticed that tight lines had appeared around her eyes. They reminded him of his own mother, whenever her sister came to take him on a job.

“Go get this Melina,” Santiago continued, tapping her foot. “By the time the Feds show, I want our dust trails blown to nowhere.”

Tex did as he was told.

#

The drive was long. At the stirrings of dawn, Tex blinked his puffy eyes at the clock on the dashboard. Four hours until Nefeli’s trial would begin.

In the backseat, Melina was sleeping, Reiko snoring into her shoulder. Kaleb had crammed himself against the window, in sleep that looked far from restful. Flak remained in the trunk with their salvaged belongings, stowed under a tarp in standby mode, conserving power.

Tex uncrossed his cramped legs and spoke softly to Santiago. “What’s our ETA?”

“Four hours,” Santiago replied. “Spaceport?”

Tex shook his head. “Federal Court of Justice.” No elaboration. There was only one reason why non-Stilbonis would head there.

For a good kilometre, Santiago said nothing. Then the SUV began to speed up.

“I can do it in three and a half.”

“Thanks.”

Tex stared into the rising sun, squinting at the never-ending landscape of trees and demarcated fields. They encountered nobody on the road except a few cyclists, pedalling hard, trying to beat the heat of the day. The handful of buildings they passed were simple wooden cabins, and low stone cottages bedraggled enough to have been built by the Liber System’s first settlers.

Not the Stilbon he’d expected, the Stilbon he’d seen in videos and pictures. Not the Stilbon his father had talked about.

Santiago caught him staring at a man struggling to balance a basket of citrus fruit on the back of a bike. “Yeah, they don’t show this on the screens.”

Tex picked at a hangnail. “It’s like Yereen.”

Santiago shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.” Then something seemed to occur to her. “Wait, is that why you all don’t like us? You think Stilbon’s some kind of paradise or something?”

It was Tex’s turn to shrug. There was no refuting it.

Santiago tutted. “Well, when you go home, you tell people it ain’t. Yeah, maybe it’s great if you’re some corporate clerk, or a hotshot lawyer or something, but it ain’t for the rest of us. It’s hand to mouth. Nobody looks out for us except ourselves.”

That, at least, sounded right. That fit with the vision of Stilbon in his head.

“Why help us, then?” he asked.

Santiago sniffed in either humour or derision; it was hard to tell. “Parental instinct. Couldn’t go leaving you in the middle of nowhere, or that young one without her parents. Sue me.”

“You have children?”

“No.” She checked her mirrors. “Nah, I’d have liked some. But I’ve got no partner, and the Feds won’t let you adopt on a single income.” Her expression became sourer than an under-ripe Stilboni lemon. “I can do my maths, though. Twice nothing is still nothing. Money shouldn’t come into it. Feds just don’t like people being different.”

Tex looked away. Santiago probably had good reason to be bitter.

Say that he was still able to become a lawyer. Say that he moved to Trivers, and made a career his life. Would that be the solution he needed it to be? Would he be happy, or would Stilbon and its expectations get to him the way they had Santiago?

Did he even want to find out? Was there another path?

The roads ahead widened, until they could fit four lanes of traffic, which began with something called a bus and steadily grew. Now they passed citrus and olive groves, and picturesque villages with colourful flower-filled window boxes. The Stilbon Tex had expected, though he could no longer say if it was the real one.

Over the crest of a hill, the Stilboni capital of Trivers was suddenly laid out before them. Sunlight sparkled off its two meandering rivers, and off elegant skyscrapers of metal and glass that spiralled impossibly upwards. Somewhere amongst them, and the sandstone apartment buildings at the heart of the city, would be the judicial district.

Driving down into the valley, the atmosphere inside the SUV changed. In the rear-view mirror, Tex could see Melina making frequent glances back at the truck bed. Kaleb’s hood stayed covering his face, and Reiko leaned over him for a better view of the city outside. The streets already teemed with people, and everything, even things that were found in Liberty, seemed bigger. Tex was used to looking along the horizon, but here, everything was *up*.

Santiago exited the main boulevard and turned down a side street, pulling into a carpark and claiming one of the few remaining spaces. “Everyone out.”

Tex got out of the car and stretched. The humidity was less intense in the city, but already heat was rising from the sandstone path running around the carpark. The rear doors slammed and the others joined him. Kaleb pushed back his hood, still looking like death given flesh.

Santiago helped Melina retrieve Flak from the trunk, then looked around at the four of them, plus robot. “Right. Go find this one’s parents.” She pointed at Reiko. “I was never here. Good luck with whatever.”

“Thank you,” Tex said, concluding a round of distracted expressions of gratitude. “If there’s anything—”

“Forget it.” Santiago held up her hand. “The drive did me good. Remember what I said.”

She got back in the car and drove away. The parting felt uncomfortably inadequate, but Tex couldn’t be sorry that she was gone.

“Tex, where’s the court?” Melina asked hurriedly, over Flak’s pronouncement that it was online and functioning optimally.

Tex told her, pointing north-west, to where a glint of gold reflected in the windows of an office block. Before he’d finished, she was already on her way, instructing Flak to follow at pace.

“Keep an eye on Reiko!” she yelled over her shoulder, bag bouncing against her hip. “I’ll meet you in that park.” She indicated a mass of trees on the far side of the carpark.

Tex slung his own bag onto his shoulders, adjusted the straps, and looked to his remaining companions. Reiko embraced a lamppost, yawning and confused. Kaleb glowered at the pavement, hands in his pockets. Neither said a word.

Melina was gone. They'd got her and Flak to Trivers. Tex's part in the endeavour was over, bringing the empty flatness of anti-climax, relief, and bewilderment. For now they were leaderless, and worse: goalless. They could stand in that carpark all day, silent, with no reason to move.

Someone had to do something. Someone had to step up. It didn't look like it was going to be Kaleb. And this wasn't space, or Yereen. This was Stilbon. Tex's domain—supposedly.

"Let's go," he said, and started walking towards the park.

By some miracle, they followed him.

## Chapter Eleven

The stone pavements of Trivers were more solid and unforgiving than the asphalt roads in the centre of Liberty. Melina weaved between Stilboni workers, trying to avoid getting caught in floaty skirts and billowing sleeves that wouldn't last a day on Yereen. Flak's neck was fully extended, but it was proving to be a trip hazard—not that the robot cared, beyond voicing a generic looping apology. Apparently, its programming ranked data accuracy above public safety.

Sweat seeped through the makeshift bandage on the back of Melina's hand, setting the gash stinging again. They turned the final corner, back onto the main boulevard. Though Tex's directions had ended there, nobody could possibly have missed the courthouse. Melina's jog slowed to a walk as she neared the bottom of a set of wide, sweeping sandstone steps.

If not for the skyscrapers that encircled it, the Federal Court of Justice would have been the largest building Melina had ever seen. Certainly, it was the grandest. It was more than five storeys of ornately carved stone, wider than Liberty's main street was long, and crowned with an oxidised copper dome above a vast rotunda. A set of simple golden scales shone from the dome's apex, and faux-ancient pillars supported a portico around the entrance.

Flak led her up the shallow steps that posed no problems for its flexing treads. Melina made one last attempt to smooth down her hair, and brush dirt from her clothes.

Through transparent sliding doors was welcome air conditioning, and a vast echoing atrium with the star-encased circles of the System's symbol inlaid in parquet on the floor. Flak zoomed off across the hall towards another staircase, this one carpeted in ochre with polished wooden bannisters.

“Melina?”

She looked up, to a mezzanine level. Leaning over the balustrade, dressed in her best pea green pinafore, was her mother. Estelle.

Melina hurried up the stairs, overtaking Flak halfway. There were plenty of people around, probably lawyers or clerks or other Feds, but nobody tried to stop her. Estelle met her at the top and swept her into her arms.

“What are you doing here?” Estelle demanded. Her fingers dug into Melina’s skin. She reminded Melina of a fuelling line negligently still attached to a ship in take-off, stretched beyond its reasonable structural integrity. “How are you here? What *happened* to you?”

Melina reluctantly extricated herself, aware of many pairs of disapproving Stilboni eyes, and of the passage of time. “Long story.” She gestured to Flak, which was navigating the uppermost stair. “This robot came to find you, at the bar. It was there on the night Mam got arrested. It recorded everything.” She met her mother’s gaze, and took a breath. “She’s innocent. It can prove it.”

Estelle’s own intake of breath was sharper than whatever shred of metal had sliced Melina’s hand. Close by, a woman whose silvering bob just brushed the collar of her fine yellow robes stepped forward.

“The robot has evidence?” she asked, dark eyebrows heading for her hairline.

“This unit is designated 7729FL7K,” Flak said cheerfully, butting in between Melina and Estelle and causing the latter to abort her attempt to again reach for her daughter. “The data concerning the alleged crime of Nefeli Odessa contains errors. I must stand as witness in the trial, and correct the record. All data must be accurate.”

“Indeed it must,” said the woman, with pleased surprise. She turned to Estelle. “Evidence provided by a robot is sacrosanct.” Something loud and metallic clanged

twice, and her expression clouded. “We must hurry. The session will soon begin. We shall present the robot, and all will be well.”

The woman, apparently a lawyer, nodded once to Melina, and placed a hand on Estelle’s arm, starting to guide her towards another set of stairs. Melina made to follow, but the lawyer raised her palm.

“For a crime of this nature, only the accused’s spouse, as next-of-kin, may be present at the trial,” she said, business-like but not unkind. “You must wait outside. I apologise.”

She dragged Estelle away, leaving Melina shuffling her feet, wanting to follow but with no idea what would happen if she did. Estelle looked back, trying to speak. No words came, though her eyes said enough. Melina tried to smile, to reassure her that it was okay.

That false smile fell from her face the moment her mother and Flak disappeared from view behind a gaggle of clerks.

She’d done it. They’d done it. Got Flak to Trivers. Got it to the trial. Like the lawyer had said, in that strange, formal Stilboni way of speaking: all would be well.

Melina had to believe that it would. She was exhausted. Her hand throbbed. Her back ached. She’d noticed in the car that her neck would only comfortably turn one way, and now that Flak was off her hands, her duty completed, all she could think about was the crash. The crash, and Kaleb.

She went back downstairs, to one of the long stone benches positioned around the walls, to wait to learn whether it had all been worth it. It had to be. The court had to find Nefeli innocent. If they had come so far, lost so much, and all for nothing, she wasn’t sure what she would do.

In times like this, not that there had ever before been a time quite like this, Melina had always turned to Kaleb. Always, but not now. She couldn't. Her anger had abated, but left behind streaks of betrayal. She wanted to forgive him. She wanted to hate him. She wanted him to grab her hand and tell her a stupid joke. She wanted to leave him behind and go to the stars and never look back.

She loved him. Nothing could ever change that, and that's what decided it.

When the trial was concluded, the verdict received, Melina would go to that park. She would find Kaleb, and she would hold on to him. It might never be the same. It might not be easy, as Gareth had warned, not with the distance, and missing each other, and the fear of slowly drifting apart. It might not last for long. Maybe months. Maybe years. Maybe a lifetime. Regardless—she would hold on to him. She would try.

Because from looking at her parents, she knew: that was what you did when you loved someone.

#

Trivers was everything that space wasn't: hot, damp, bright, crowded. Kaleb was unsure which he hated more.

Over the course of the long, interminable drive, he'd resolved that if Melina asked him to accompany her to the court, he would go. Otherwise, he'd keep his distance, no matter how much it hurt. He would respect her wishes. That was the least she deserved.

So he had trailed after Tex to this park, with its elaborate children's climbing structure that Reiko had immediately run off to. Kaleb had found a patch of grass beneath a broad pale-trunked tree and sat in it.

Even Stilboni grass was different—a brighter green, shinier and softer. Kaleb reclined against the tree and closed his eyes. Displaced air from nearby traffic whooshed, and children laughed and shrieked. He couldn't relax.

Giving up, he sat forward and plucked a blade of grass, winding it around his index fingertip. Getting Flak to Stilbon had been the aim, but fulfilling it had brought only more problems. Tex, Rhiannon's ship, Melina... All problems of his own making. All problems he would have to solve. It would help if the thought of doing so didn't make him want to jump into one of the city's namesake rivers, or find another cactus to vomit into.

A shadow fell over him, and Tex sat down on his left. There was little point in edging away.

"Do you want food?" Tex asked. "I've got a few Liberos. There's a shop nearby."

Kaleb's blade of grass snapped. He flicked the shreds of green away, watching them flutter downwards. "Stop it."

Tex paused. "Stop what?"

Kaleb ripped up another blade of grass, and searched his fatigue-depleted vocabulary for something that didn't sound stupid. Failing, he mistakenly chose speech over silence. "Being a decent person."

The second blade broke, so Kaleb plucked a third.

Damn Tex. Why did he have to choose the exact moment that Kaleb committed a catalogue of epic failures to turn over a new leaf? Kaleb had screwed up enough that Melina had all but slammed a door in his face, and there Tex had been, ready to usurp him as the person she could rely on. While Kaleb had thrown up in a bush, Tex had found them a ride to Trivers.

Even taking Melina out of it, Kaleb had blackmailed Tex out of his aunt's ship. Now the *Parisian* lay in bits in a grotty field thanks to a run-in with the Feds, potentially putting Tex in very big trouble. Tex's revenge? Offering to buy him lunch.

"You were a dick," Kaleb said, exasperated and frustrated, finally dropping the years-old clownish mask of superiority that had always kept him from saying how he really felt. "An absolute bastard. You made a lot of people's lives a misery. I hated school, because of you. You made it hell."

"I know," Tex said quietly.

"Are you sorry?"

"Yes."

Kaleb glared at him. "Because of what came next? Because I finally grew the balls to stand up to you, and you got to know how it feels to be treated like utter dirt?"

"No," Tex said. He span the fastening on his right boot. "I'm sorry because, yes, I was a dick, and you didn't deserve it. Nobody did."

Kaleb snorted and looked away. "Is this where you claim you didn't deserve the blackmail, and I'm expected to apologise to you?"

"No," Tex said again. Kaleb heard his sigh, and the now-familiar sound of lush grass being torn from its roots. "I don't care if I did or didn't deserve it. Maybe I deserved some of it. Yes, maybe you did go too far. But I could have stopped you, and I chose not to. I let you have the bloody ship. And anyway, you already apologised to me."

So he had. After the crash. Kaleb recalled kneeling in the muck, sour acid in his mouth. Tex telling him to breathe. Both of them apologising. In Kaleb's defence, he hadn't been at all in his right mind.

"You're a dick too," Tex said, "but you weren't before I came along."

“No,” Kaleb said strongly. “No way. You didn’t *make* me. Whatever I am, I made myself; you had nothing to do with it.”

“I was a different person before you stood up to me,” Tex said. “It doesn’t make me happy to think that you had a hand in making me who I am today, but it’s true. So why not the other way around?”

Kaleb told him where to go.

“Come on,” Tex said. “I’m offering you the chance to blame some of your transgressions on me—to yourself, anyway. Take it.”

In answer, Kaleb ripped up a handful of grass and threw it at him. It was childish in the extreme, but it made him feel better in the short moments before he got a handful to the face in return.

He swatted it away, spluttering. “What do you want from me?” he demanded. “If not an apology?”

“How about a truce?”

Kaleb shook grass from his shirt and swivelled to face Tex’s hunched profile. “Are you kidding me?”

Tex shrugged. “I don’t like you. You don’t like me either. I was a dick to you, you’ve been a dick to me; we’ve established that.” He looked sidelong at Kaleb. “I let you take the *Parisian*, and it didn’t survive the trip. All in all, I’d say we’re about even.”

A toddler could have read Tex’s unease with his own idea, but also his trepidation. Bafflingly to Kaleb, the intent looked genuine. “You want a clean slate?”

“Yes,” Tex said.

Earth, he was mad. Tex spoke of dislike, but he had to know that Kaleb hated him, more so now that Tex had been the one to try and deescalate their long conflict, to be the bigger person.

Then again, Kaleb wasn't stupid. He'd gone too far with his revenge vendetta—much too far. Here on the grass in the Federal capital, he knew full well that he'd acted like a Fed, and it shamed him. He couldn't forgive Tex. He would never forgive Tex. But Tex would never forgive him, either, nor should he. If that made them even in Tex's mind, then maybe a clean slate would work. Outside of one of them leaving the System, maybe starting over was the only sane option left, the only one that wouldn't end in an even bigger disaster than a near-fatal shuttle crash.

Kaleb brushed the last of the grass from his hands, and offered one to Tex before he could talk himself out of it. The left: shaking with the right was a Stilboni thing, and there were to be no doubts of the sincerity of the gesture. If they were doing this, they were doing it properly.

"Kaleb Ashton."

Hesitantly, Tex took his hand and shook it. His grip was stronger, more assured, than the rest of his body language had implied it would be. "Tex Korovin."

Kaleb refused to be the first to let go. Clean slate or not, it was Kaleb's move—let Tex be the one to back down.

However, Tex held on. "I'd like to make an apology."

"Clean slate," Kaleb reminded him.

"Wait," Tex said. "It's... more of an apology to Melina. She doesn't know I said it, so I can't apologise to her, but it doesn't feel right to forget about it." Kaleb raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry for what I said on the ship, when you were running the diagnostics. About you and her."

He broke off, but that was already enough to make Kaleb's toes curl at the recollection. Clean slate, he reminded himself, as he had Tex. Clean slate.

"All right," he said. "Apology accepted, on her behalf."

Tex let out a swift breath and dropped Kaleb's hand. "All right."

Kaleb looked across at the playground. He spotted Reiko hanging upside down near the top of the pyramidal climbing structure, watching them with narrowed eyes. He mouthed for her to shoo, and she made a show of pulling herself up and retreating into the structure's inner guts.

Tex remained beside him, fidgety. Kaleb warred with asking him to spit out whatever it was he still had to say, but decided to honour their truce and let Tex get there in his own time. He leaned back against the tree once more.

"You and Melina," Tex began.

"What about it?" Kaleb asked icily.

"It's... not really about you and Melina." Tex ripped up another handful of grass, and Kaleb's interest increased. "When we had that conversation," and conversation was certainly one word for it, "you said that romance and sex weren't your thing."

"I did," Kaleb said warily.

"Was that true?"

Taken aback by Tex's sudden ferocity, Kaleb blinked, more bewildered than wounded. "Yes?"

Tex nodded to himself, over and over, and went back to his grass. "What's that like?"

Had Kaleb fallen through a black hole into some strange alternate universe? Had he not walked away from the shuttle crash, and instead was lying comatose in the cockpit, trapped in the bizarre imaginings of his subconscious? Unlikely. This entire conversation was too outlandish to be of his own invention, and Kaleb simply wasn't that lucky.

There was no reason why he should respond to Tex's query. Absolutely none. Not the vulnerable hunch of Tex's shoulders, as if he both did and did not want an answer, and especially not Kaleb's burning curiosity. The impression that if he gave a few centimetres of himself, Tex might give a few of his own.

No reason—except that people never asked. Not in the way that Tex was asking, with cautious interest, not judgement.

"I'm just not interested in any of it," Kaleb said. "I don't see the point, or the draw."

Tex nodded. "Like how Astros don't have relationships."

"No," Kaleb said. "That's cultural. I think probably a lot of them do feel that way, but not all. I mean, not all of them are single. It's just a choice they make, because in space that's easier." That was his understanding of it, anyway. Most of his knowledge came from Melina, so it was hard to be sure. Her disinterest in romance was innate, but Kaleb thought it unlikely that most pilots could be aromantic.

Thinking of Melina in the context of the Astros' practical disinclination for relationships opened mental doors that Kaleb did not wish to go through, so he closed them firmly and carried on. "It's not a choice for me. I have never once looked at a person and thought, hey, I want to date them, or sleep with them. I'd rather not do any of that at all."

Tex simply sat there and listened, no offer of comment. That was new, for Kaleb. Not the discussion, but the silence. Kaleb had come to understand that people like himself were rare, and that it was rarer still for them not to head skywards and join the Astros. He could see, through Melina, how attractive that prospect was, see how just by stating her piloting ambitions she had exempted herself from many of the

pressures Kaleb navigated on Yereen. If Kaleb had possessed the head and the stomach for space, he might have followed her.

The trouble with the Astros was that if you said you weren't interested in that romance-and-sex thing, people assumed you had ambitions to become one. If you didn't, they started to act like Flak faced with a computational error, and became desperate to correct the record to something they could comprehend. Kaleb had been told that he was too young, and would change his mind when he got older, or—once—that he was a prude, a closet Stilboni, for finding talk of sex repulsive. There was a reason he stuck to hanging around with Melina. Guys he'd tried to befriend in Liberty were interested in many things, but eventually that topic always cropped up, and Kaleb had grown tired of pretending or explaining himself—and tired of the reactions that got.

“Like I said, I'm asexual and aromantic,” Kaleb told Tex. “I know Stilbonis don't like labels of any description, so go ahead and roast me for it, but I like having them.” For a society that spread so much inequality, Stilbonis sure as hell hated people expressing their differences. Perhaps they were just tired of the rest of the System calling them names.

For the first time, Tex shook his head. “I'm not going to roast you.” He stumbled over the expression, as if it had never before passed his lips. It probably hadn't. “Using labels makes sense. I'm starting to see that.”

Tex, rejecting a key tenet of Stilboni philosophy? Kaleb began to suspect that Tex had hit his head in the crash. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tex said. “It saves a lot of hassle.” He clenched his fists, but there was no aggression in it. “For instance, we can both agree that Santiago wasn't a Fed,

without having to discuss the minutiae of her behaviour. And I can just say to you that I think I'm asexual, too."

Kaleb straightened. That was unexpected.

Or was it? Perhaps, perhaps not. Kaleb resisted the urge to trawl back through everything he'd ever observed about Tex, every rumour about his failed relationship with Adrian Muscat. It wasn't his place to question, not without Tex once again, rightfully, accusing him of hypocrisy. He couldn't complain about people questioning his identity and experience, then immediately question someone else's.

At the same time—what to say to Tex? Anything that could invite Tex to have a heartfelt discussion with him about anything, particularly sexuality, was firmly off the table. Thankfully, Tex's talk of using labels to avoid explanations suggested that was never in danger of happening.

Not knowing what Tex would want from him, or if he should care what Tex wanted, Kaleb tried to put himself in Tex's shoes. To think of what he'd want Tex to say to him, if their positions were reversed.

"Okay," Kaleb said neutrally. "Cool."

"Okay," Tex said, after a moment.

Kaleb returned to watching Reiko. He reasoned that, if Tex offered to fetch lunch again, he could at least be confident that it wasn't poisoned, but that wasn't Tex's next question.

"Will you be able to go back to Yereen with Melina's family?"

Kaleb hadn't thought about that. "Probably." Even if the worst happened, and Nefeli was unjustly convicted, or Melina wanted nothing more to do with him, Estelle would see him safely home. "They'd probably scrounge for a ticket for you too. Or

maybe Melina could find you a ride.” Since they’d spent an entire night together, making friends. Kaleb tried not to be bitter, and failed.

Tex’s gaze pointed to the playground, but Kaleb suspected it was truly focused on something much further away. “I’m not sure I want to go back.”

“You want to stay on Stilbon?” It made sense. He was still Stilboni, by nature and nurture.

Yet Tex was quietly firm. “No.” His eyes didn’t move, but their focus retreated. “I was thinking. Maybe... Maybe Reiko and Melina have the right idea.”

“Going to space?” Kaleb really couldn’t see him as an Astro, or an explorer.

Tex shrugged. “Maybe I don’t belong on Yereen, or on Stilbon.”

Against his will, Kaleb found himself pitying him. Here Tex was, spilling his heartfelt secrets to the person who had just spent months blackmailing him. For all his lack of social circle, Kaleb could, or hoped he still could, confide in Melina—and even without her, he had his parents, and younger siblings. Apparently, with Melina at court, all Tex had was Kaleb. Whose fault was that?

“Don’t worry about it,” Kaleb told him. “You belong where you want to belong.”

Tex said nothing. That was fine. Kaleb had never wanted to talk to him in the first place.

He wriggled into a more comfortable position and focused again on the noise of the traffic and the playground. While his eyes were closed, he didn’t miss Tex’s muttered thank you. He wondered if that was gratitude he wanted.

He wondered if it was gratitude he deserved.

## Epilogue

Nefeli Odessa's trial had concluded. 7729FL7K stood idle at the back of the courtroom. It had obeyed its programming. The evidence had been presented, and the record corrected. Nefeli Odessa was innocent. Nefeli Odessa was cleared of all charges, and free to leave. The data had been made accurate.

7729FL7K felt no satisfaction in completing its task, for it was incapable of feeling. Its circuits had moved on to its next purpose: returning to its owner at the electronic motorcycle shop in Liberty, and delivering its recording of the newest notices on the obelisk in the market. 7729FL7K knew that in order to do this, it must find a way to return to Yereen.

Two-point-eight-nine-four metres away stood a woman and a man, both dressed in the formal yellow robes worn by lawyers inside a Federal courtroom. These were people with authority. They would be able to assist 7729FL7K in returning to Yereen.

It extended its neck to its full height, and approached. "Greetings," it said. "The data has been made accurate. I must now return to my owner in Liberty, Yereen. Please assist."

The man spoke to the woman. "Someone ought to return the robot. Where did it come from? Who brought it to the trial?"

The silver-haired woman said, "Odessa's daughter arrived with it, at the final moment. A surprise, certainly."

"Yes, indeed," said the man. "I congratulate you once again."

The woman bowed her head, smiling. "My thanks, once again. I presume the girl brought it here on the ferry. I know where the family is residing. It will be no trouble to return the robot to her, and on the ferry it shall again be conveyed."

7729FL7K recorded this exchange through twin microphones on either side of its head. The soundwaves became code, which 7729FL7K's processors immediately catalogued.

"Error," 7729FL7K said cheerfully. "There is an error."

This new data did not match the vast amounts of data stored in its memory. Correct: 7729FL7K had travelled to Stilbon with Odessa's daughter. Incorrect: it had not travelled on a public ferry.

7729FL7K had travelled to Stilbon on a shuttle designated *Parisian*, which had crashed subsequent to a chase involving Federal vehicles. The relevancy of this information was not important. The claim that 7729FL7K had travelled via ferry was false, and facts must replace falsehoods. Errors must be corrected.

The man and woman both looked at 7729FL7K. It would correct the error, and then return to its owner. The data would be made accurate.

This was its programming. This was its purpose.

## **Accurate Data: Using Young Adult Science Fiction to Explore the Impacts of**

### **Compulsory Sexuality on Young Ace Lives**

This project utilises Young Adult science fiction to explore the impacts that a culture of compulsory sexuality has on young ace lives. Through my novella, *Accurate Data*, I aim to interrogate and expose compulsory sexuality, exploring the variations of ace teenagers' experiences of it and the impacts it can have on their lives. I also aim to envision the concept of a society without compulsory sexuality, and to explore possible effects such a society might have on young ace lives. By doing so, I challenge many existing representations of ace lives in YA and science fiction, identifying and filling gaps in the representation of teen asexuality.

*Accurate Data* is a YA SF novella featuring the perspectives of four ace-spectrum teenage protagonists. When Flak, a non-sapient robot, discovers that Melina's mother is innocent of the crime she is to be tried for, Melina and her younger cousin Reiko embark on a quest to present Flak's evidence to the court on the distant planet Stilbon. Working with Melina's partner, Kaleb, and his arch-rival, Tex, they appropriate a spaceship and travel from their home on Yereen across the Liber star system, via a rendezvous with friends from the Astro community on the space station Fortitude.

*Accurate Data* uses this narrative to explore and address ace issues and themes, within the contexts of compulsory sexuality, allonormativity, and an imagined form of aronormativity.

This accompanying essay is composed of three parts. First, I briefly survey asexuality and its relations to compulsory sexuality, before examining how theoretical models of

sexuality, desire, and intimacy often fail to address asexuality and compulsory sexuality, and what the existence of asexuality may mean for these approaches. Second, I detail my rationale for using YA fiction in this project, examining two key examples of recent YA texts which address asexuality and compulsory sexuality in order to highlight how my novella differs from previous approaches. An appendix catalogues further YA (and SF) texts that engage with asexuality and compulsory sexuality on varying levels. Third, I examine how SF provides unique opportunities for *Accurate Data* to explore asexuality and the impacts of compulsory sexuality, and thus to achieve my project aims.

## **I. Asexuality and compulsory sexuality**

According to the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), 'an asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction' (n.d.). However, this definition of asexuality is subject to dispute, not least because of the existence of related identities, including grey-asexuality and demisexuality, and the concept of romantic attraction as separate from sexual attraction, leading to split identities such as heteroromantic asexual. For the purposes of this essay, I will follow such scholars as Florencia Catri (2021), and Nicolette Robbins, Kathryn Graff-Low and Anna Query (hereafter Robbins et al) (2016) in treating asexuality as an umbrella category of (a)sexual orientation, primarily using the term 'ace' and referring to an ace spectrum.<sup>1</sup>

The discipline of asexuality studies emerged in the late twentieth century, and is, as Elizabeth Emens (2014) describes, traceable through four discourses:

1. Conceptual, with the positing of asexuality as a fourth sexual orientation by psychologist Michael Storms (1980);
2. Clinical, through the psychiatric diagnosis of Hyposexual Desire Disorder under the DSM-III, a diagnosis deemed erroneous under the DSM-V as recognition of asexuality as a(n) (a)sexual orientation increased;
3. Empirical, with Anthony Bogaert's (2004) finding that approximately one percent of British adults can be termed asexual;
4. Identity based, via the growth of AVEN and other online ace communities.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on varied understandings of asexuality within sociology, see: Brunning and McKeever (2021), Carrigan (2011), Cerankowski and Milks (2010), Emens (2014), Mitchell and Hunicutt (2019), Przybylo (2019), Przybylo and Gupta (2020), Weis et al (2020).

Asexuality research remains based in the fields of sociology and psychology, with less work in the humanities, and neglect within critical theory, as observed by leading asexuality studies scholars Ela Przybylo and Kristina Gupta (2020). Potential reasons for and effects of this apparent neglect are discussed below. Within literary studies, engagement with asexuality is generally confined to ace revisionist readings of texts formerly read through a queer lens.<sup>2</sup> Yet as Simone Chess (2018) has discussed, assigning these often historical characters modern ace identities would be anachronistic. This essay therefore instead focuses on modern texts containing explicitly ace characters, in order to examine the impacts that compulsory sexuality has on these individuals.

In the words of Gupta, compulsory sexuality:

...describe[s] the assumption that all people are sexual and [...] the social norms and practices that both marginalize forms of nonsexuality [...] and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity (2015, p132).

Gupta conceptualises it as a pervasive 'system of social control' (p132), and claims that 'feminist scholarship on compulsory heterosexuality' can equally evidence compulsory sexuality (p135). Related to compulsory sexuality is the notion of allonormativity, yet I argue that the two concepts are distinct, as the former presents as more overt and hegemonic than the latter. I demonstrate this in my novella, separating the exploration of compulsory sexuality and allonormativity through assigning these conditions to two equally distinct imagined societies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ace revisionist readings include those by Chess (2020), Cole (2021), Gupta and Cerankowski (2017), Osterwald (2017), Przybylo (2019), Przybylo and Cooper (2014), and Smith (2020).

The investigation and interrogation of compulsory sexuality is important for multiple reasons, asexuality aside. Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever (2021) note that the amatonormative aspect of compulsory sexuality leads to the devaluation of friendship and other non-romantic relationships, while Casey Ryan Kelly and Chase Aunspach (2020) highlight links between compulsory sexuality and the rise of the incel movement. Przybylo also points to compulsory sexuality's links with hypersexualisation and desexualisation, 'used as forms of social control and oppression [...] towards the maintenance of a white, able-bodied, heteropatriarchal state' (2019, p16). Meanwhile, Gupta and Karli Cerankowski suggest employing compulsory sexuality as an analytic lens for 'read[ing] and interpret[ing] various representations of sexuality in the media' (2017, p20), which has utility both within and beyond asexuality studies.

My specific concern is with the interrelationship between compulsory sexuality and asexuality, and with the impacts compulsory sexuality has on young ace lives, which I explore in my novella. These are not insubstantial: as Theresa Kenney writes, 'compulsory sexuality operates to normalize sex and sexuality while simultaneously marginalizing nonsexuality' (2020, p8). Gupta categorises these impacts as 'pathologization, isolation, unwanted sex and relationship conflict, and the denial of epistemic authority' (2017, p993), but this list is not exhaustive. More recently, Brunning and McKeever (2021) have divided the harms caused by compulsory sexuality to ace individuals into two categories: those caused by asexuality's erasure, and by its denigration. I reference these categories throughout this essay. Asexual erasure can lead to hermeneutical injustice, whereby ace individuals 'struggle to make sense of their own experiences' and convey them to others (p509), and silencing, which can render it 'impossible to refuse sexual advances [...] on the grounds of asexuality'

(p511), potentially making ace individuals vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault.

Denigration, meanwhile, covers discrimination against asexuality and those who identify as asexual (acephobia).

### **Queer Theory**

As mentioned above, critical theory has largely neglected to engage with asexuality, though resonances with both asexuality and compulsory sexuality can be found within the work of notable theorists.

Judith Butler writes that binaries of sex and gender can be considered 'regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalise the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression' ([1989] 1999, p44). It could further be claimed that sexuality is an equally regulatory fiction perpetuated by, and perpetuating, compulsory sexuality, as a power regime that marginalises asexuality and non-sexuality. Her condemnation in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) of the positioning of heterosexuality and homosexuality as mutually exclusive on grounds of bisexual erasure is also relevant, as this positioning similarly erases asexuality.

Further ace resonances lie in Michel Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure* ([1984] 1992), such as in his description of the Ancient Greek virtuous hero who abstains from sexual pleasures, though the virtue here lies in the mastery of allosexual desire, not asexual disinterest. Importantly, Foucault's examinations of the history of sexuality may also be read as the history of *compulsory* sexuality. His *dispositif* of sexuality encompasses elements familiar to the sociological study of asexuality under compulsory sexuality, and can account for many of its negative impacts on ace lives. For instance, the

medicalisation of sexuality allows for the pathologisation of asexuality, exacerbated by sexualised marketing and moral discourses of sexuality as 'natural', which also provoke feelings of alienation for ace individuals and lead to the erasure and denigration of asexuality.

Also resonant are the observations of Catherine Belsey, within the context of desire in Western culture. She asks, 'What if there is no human sexual relation outside culture[?]' (1994, p5), which has clear resonance with compulsory sexuality, while her statement that 'possibly by naturalising [desire] we construct exclusions or make failures' can describe its marginalisation and denigration of ace individuals. Belsey questions Western cultures' views of (hetero)sexuality as natural, and points out that 'since Freud other activities are very often seen as a substitute for sex' (p7): evidence for the insidious pervasiveness of sexuality in many aspects of life under compulsory sexuality, and the consequential alienation and isolation of ace individuals.

Audre Lorde's (1978) unbounding of the erotic from the sexual also has application to the study of asexuality and compulsory sexuality, as utilised by Przybylo in her 2019 work, *Asexual Erotics*. Lorde conceptualises the erotic as 'a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' of any pursuit ([1978] 1984, p54), and sees one of its functions as bringing intimacy through 'sharing deeply any pursuit with another person' (p56). This emphasis on feeling provides an asexual erotic, a 'model of intimacy that is tied neither to sex nor romance' (Przybylo and Gupta 2020, pix). Przybylo uses this to explore asexuality, and applies the ideas that Lorde used to question patriarchal heterosexism to her own interrogation of compulsory sexuality.

Yet while the ideas of these theorists can all be applied to the study of asexuality and compulsory sexuality, critical theory still generally fails to address or engage with these concepts directly. Indeed, Przybylo uncovers compulsory sexuality within queer theory, exposing a sexual presumption that lies within both the sexual purity and sexual agency models of understanding children's sexualities. 'Childhood asexuality', she writes, 'is often rendered impossible within queer theory', and 'is frequently framed as a marker of immaturity, closetedness, presexuality, or stunted development' (2019, p92). Thus, queer theory in fact contributes to the perpetuation of norms of compulsory sexuality, and the erasure of ace young people's experiences by failing to entertain their existence. This erasure is exacerbated by the conspicuous failure of some critical theorists to utilise or reference asexuality when engaging with the concept of compulsory sexuality, which Przybylo and Gupta (2020) decry.

There is no obvious reason for this critical neglect of asexuality. Przybylo and Danielle Cooper suggest that asexuality may be 'too easily interpreted [...] as antithetical to [...] sex radical thinking' (2014, p305); Megan Cole argues that queer theory is 'still too preoccupied with sex' (2021, p84), which asexuality resists; Kenney theorises that critical theory 'struggles to expand its boundaries [...] as it tends to promote intimacy through the sexual' (2020, p9), ignorant of notions of non-sexual intimacy. I apply Adam Green's critique of queer theory in the study of homosexuality to offer a further potential explanation. Green states that to choose queer theory as an analytic method is to reject empiricism, and to construct a subject 'with little connection to [...] the sociohistorical forces that shape sexual practice and identity' (2002, p522). As such, I argue that queer theory may not be an appropriate lens for examining the lives of ace individuals or the impacts that compulsory sexuality has on them. Additionally, I use

Green's application of strands of queer theory to homosexuality to point out queer theory's shortcomings in the study of asexuality. First, Green claims that radical deconstructionism glosses over 'the enduring institutional organisation of sexuality' (p523), and so it might equally neglect the ways in which compulsory sexuality compels ace identity and community formation. Second, Green argues that radical subversion 'superimposes a politically marginal self-concept on the homosexual subject' (p523), and makes the act of claiming a non-normative identity a political act, for which there is scant empirical evidence. Green ultimately calls for more engagement with sociology in the study of sexuality, which could offer agency to (ace) individuals where queer theory might risk turning them into objects in a political project. Partly as a result of these assessments, I chose to write my novella with attention not only to critical theories, but also, and indeed more so, to sociological research of asexuality and the impacts of compulsory sexuality on ace lives.

Rather than ask what queer theory might offer to the study of asexuality and compulsory sexuality, it may then be more prudent to ask what asexuality might offer to queer theory. Przybylo and Cooper call not for queerness to be expanded to include asexuality, but for queerness to be entirely reworked from an asexual perspective, 'think[ing] with a new attention to asexuality' (2014, p311). They demonstrate this through their creation and use of a queerly asexual reading method to both expand the asexual archive and 'provide queer theory with previously unrecognized and unexplored modes of analysis' (p304). Karen Cuthbert's (2019) empirical research suggests that asexuality may have implications for the study of gender, while Anthony Bogaert (2015) proposes that an ace perspective may offer a valuable outsider's view of sexuality. Asexuality may even catalyse a complete reformulation of sexual

orientation, as Brunning and McKeever posit, which 'depriorit[es] sex and/or gender, and instead focus[es] on patterns of attraction towards traits, behaviours, situations, or even individuals' (2021, p501).

### **Ace notions of intimacy**

Above all, asexuality presents the opportunity to revise and overturn many existing paradigms in the areas of sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, novel ace understandings of desire and intimacy may challenge the norms of compulsory sexuality and the structures of allonormativity and amatonormativity. As Heather Mitchell and Gwen Hunnicutt observe, asexuality research 'highlight[s] the possibility that love and sex are both different and sometimes unrelated' (2019, p509), and the distinctions between romance and friendship, and the romantic and the sexual, are especially crucial for ace individuals. Though, as Gupta claims, ace intimate relationships may not appear distinct from 'the type of monogamous, romantic relationships idealised by mainstream society' aside from 'the absence of sex' (2017, p1004), this absence makes such a distinction critical, as the allonormative expectations of an allosexual partner can cause conflict within the relationship, and even put ace individuals at increased risk of sexual assault. A discussion of ace notions of intimacy and intimate relationships is critical to my project, with my novella exploring such a relationship between the characters Melina and Kaleb.

Kristin Scherrer explores how asexuality alters notions of the sexual, sexuality, and romance. She writes that asexuality 'problematizes the boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual' (2008, p629), as it often redefines behaviours traditionally conceived of as sexual, questioning the very designation of such behaviours as sexual

or non-sexual. Asexuality also inherently challenges notions of 'sexuality as naturally being part of a human experience' (p632), with compulsory sexuality necessitating that ace individuals reject norms of sexuality as innate as part of the process of ace identity development. Through empirical research, Scherrer also found that an asexual identity allows individuals to approach intimate relationships in a more genderblind manner than bisexuality, which is defined by (multiple) gender(s), 'illustrat[ing] the deeply entrenched centrality of gender' in understandings of sexuality (p365). These intimate relationships varied, Scherrer found, depending on the romantic orientation of the individual. Alloromantic aces desired relationships that were 'primarily monogamous [and] dyadic' with a degree of physical intimacy (p634), whereas aromantic aces preferred relationships 'characterized by friendship and lack of physical contact' (p633). These findings begin to support the idea that asexuality can offer new forms of intimacy, and demonstrate the diversity within the ace spectrum and the need to resist a monolithic concept of asexuality.

Sociologists Matt Dawson, Suzie Scott, and Liz McDonnell (hereafter Dawson et al) also found that ace individuals often 'spoke of [friends] as a source of physical intimacy' (2016, p355), blurring the line between friendship and (romantic) partnership, though they warn that this blurring is contingent upon those non-ace friends' acceptance and understanding of asexuality. However, these general, normative friendships should not be confused with aromantic partnerships, making Amanda Mollet's claim that aromantic ace relationships can be classed as 'deeply emotional friendships' (2020, p202) flawed. Due to compulsory sexuality's elevation of romance, Mollet's view may serve to diminish the importance of ace relationships, as the very word 'friendship' is undervalued, seen in such phrases as 'just friends' and 'more than friends' to denote

the absence or presence of romance. To claim that a committed, non-romantic ace relationship is 'just friendship' would be erroneous: few normative friendships would include buying a home, co-parenting, or otherwise living a life as partners, making such relationships non-normative by definition.

These non-normative notions of intimacy and relationships again provide an example of what attention to asexuality could offer queer theory. Kenney capitalises on the opportunity asexuality offers for re-examining existing ideas, using it as an analytic tool to recognise and examine 'alternative forms of belonging' (2020, p5). Indeed, Kenney criticises contemporary queer theory for 'promot[ing] intimacy primarily through the sexual, despite the ways in which asexuality can trickle into our ways of being intimate' (p9). She returns to the notion of the erotic as not bound to either sex or romance, writing that in moving towards 'constellations of close platonic intimacies', ace relationships can offer an opposition to relations 'steeped in compulsory sexuality' (p9). By using asexuality as an analytic tool for re-examining relations outside of the ace sphere, Kenney demonstrates how asexuality can alter normative notions of intimacy, even if, as Gupta claims, the intimate practices of ace individuals themselves may not. The findings of Kenney, Scherrer, and others were important in shaping my depiction of Melina and Kaleb's relationship, which I explore later in this essay.

### **Young ace lives**

Adolescence is the period of the development of the self, and the period in which an interest in romantic and sexual relationships normatively begins to develop. Logic therefore suggests that this is also the period in which a realisation of a lack of interest in such relationships would develop, and subsequently an ace identity. Given that my

project concerns the impacts of compulsory sexuality on young ace lives, research of teenage asexuality is therefore key to the development and creation of my novella. However, such research is notably lacking. It may be that the clinical component of asexuality's history, that disinterest in sex is only seen as 'abnormal' in adults, combined with the notion of teens as 'late bloomers' denying them the epistemic authority to claim an ace identity, has resulted in the erasure of adolescent asexuality. There is also difficulty in separating adolescent asexuality from pre-sexuality, except retrospectively, leading Bogaert (2004) to predict that more teenagers would identify as asexual than adults—though this prediction was proven false. The lack of research is compounded by the fact that many major sociological studies of asexuality have a minimum age of participation of eighteen, including those claiming to focus on young people. Where research exists, it is within the context of pedagogical methods in the education system, or consists of mental health studies that recognise that ace teens have worse mental health than their allosexual peers, but do not investigate or speculate why.

Studies of ace experiences in a university environment are not entirely applicable to younger teenagers—for example, Erin Hampson's (2020) focused on allonormative hook-up and drinking culture—but can offer some insights. Hampson highlights impacts of compulsory sexuality that are unrelated to life stage, including alienation from peers and issues surrounding coming out, as does Mollet (2020), such as pathologisation, denial of epistemic authority, and the sense of relief on establishing an ace identity. Unusually, Mollet also details some of her interviewees' accounts of their experiences in high school: feeling the need to date someone in order to fit in,

and being proud of being good at abstinence preached by faith leaders. Yet specific research of ace teens' experiences of compulsory sexuality remains deficient.

One option may be to apply wider LGBTQIA+ research to asexuality, but there are a number of problems with this. Although this acronym is a grouping of non-normative identities, each individual identity has a distinct history, so one cannot be taken as synonymous for another. Gay and lesbian identities are far more established than ace and aro, for example, and also conform to allonormativity and amatonormativity, so such individuals are less likely to be impacted by compulsory sexuality. Additionally, many 'LGBTQ+' studies which claim to refer to the entire acronym/community do not include asexuality, an omission not recognised by authors as a research limitation. The one exception to all of this is research on bisexuality, as the bisexual experience of compulsory heterosexuality shares many parallels with the ace experience of compulsory sexuality. Both identities are often seen as a transition between being gay or straight, due to what Jennifer Coletta calls 'compulsory binarization' (2018, p86), and both are erased. Ultimately, however, in the absence of specific research of adolescent asexuality, my only recourse when writing *Accurate Data* was to apply general asexuality research as if it were universal.

## II. Ace Young Adult literature

Defining YA literature as a form is challenging, but Marci Glaus provides a summary of its foundational aspects: teenage protagonists, 'dealing with issues to which teens can relate', where plot outcomes 'depend on the decisions and choices' of those teen protagonists (2014, p408). These definitions immediately clarify my choice of YA in this thesis, which examines the experiences of ace teens and the impacts that compulsory sexuality has on them. My YA novella, *Accurate Data*, features ace characters who deal with issues that Western teenagers may relate to, including ace-related issues such as identity development, coming out, and relationships, as well as more mainstream issues like bullying and pressure for academic success. YA is also aimed specifically at young people, enabling my project to have a potential positive social contribution through offering validation to ace teenagers experiencing impacts of compulsory sexuality.

Further features of YA literature have been highlighted by Steven VanderStaay (1992), and Arsenio Silva and Rochelle Savitz (2019). VanderStaay notes that YA characters develop autonomy of thought and action as a form of a story of passage, which resonates with the requirement of autonomous thought for teenagers to develop an ace identity despite compulsory sexuality, a development which is itself a story of passage. In *Accurate Data*, Melina displays autonomy of thought in developing her own opinion of Tex, who himself comes to develop autonomy of thought during the development of an ace identity that runs contrary to the compulsory sexuality within his culture. Reiko and Kaleb also display autonomy of thought in their refusal to conform to normative expectations of them, fitting with Silva and Savitz's observation

that YA texts often contain non-stereotypical representations of adolescents. They present three themes of these representations: taking on adult roles, ‘from parent to political activist’ (2019, p327); displaying behaviour that is not emotionally-driven or selfish, demonstrating ‘wisdom, restraint, and sacrifice not expected of typical youths’ (p328); and showing awareness of their own power and capacity for self-reliance, ‘tak[ing] control of their own lives and personal circumstances’ (p329). Silva and Savitz argue that these themes demonstrate that teenagers are often underestimated, and that societal perceptions of them as dependant, irrational, or incapable should be re-evaluated—much as societal perceptions of asexuality and non-sexuality need revision. In *Accurate Data*, for example, Melina takes on the adult roles of captain of the *Parisian* and interim guardian to Reiko, while Tex displays non-emotionally driven behaviour when he apologises to Melina, and also shows awareness of his own power to break free of Kaleb and Rhiannon and determine his own future.

YA literature with LGBTQIA+ themes also has its own specific features. Though their surveys of such texts do not cover asexuality, focusing instead on homosexuality (2006), bisexuality and gender identity (2018), Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins determine three useful category descriptors for their evolution. These are homosexual visibility, in which the entire narrative concerns a non-heterosexual character developing their identity and coming out; gay assimilation, in which the narrative is unconcerned with LGBTQIA+ issues and some characters ‘just happen to be’ gay; and queer consciousness/community, in which non-heterosexual characters are shown within the context of their community. They call for future LGBTQIA+ texts to be culturally conscious, and to detail not how these characters are seen by others, but how they see themselves. *Accurate Data* answers this call by showing ace characters

within the context of a wider ace community, from the small scale of Tex seeking community with Melina and Kaleb, to the larger scale of the Astros, space-farers who reject allosexual and alloromantic norms. However, overall the novella falls somewhere in between these three categories, consistent with my aim to explore the impacts of compulsory sexuality on ace teenagers. While the narrative does not entirely concern the development of ace identity and coming out, exploring these issues is crucial to my research aims, and they therefore comprise vital subplots. Yet it would be incorrect to call *Accurate Data* an ace (rather than homosexual) visibility text: the characters' ace identities being incidental to the central plot of acquitting Melina's mother would fit Cart and Jenkins's category of assimilation, and the characters being shown within the context of their ace communities fits that of consciousness/community. *Accurate Data* therefore goes beyond many existing YA texts in its representation of young ace lives, as I return to below.

YA texts that engage directly with ace experience have received little critical attention, though Alex Henderson examines the novels *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* by Kathryn Ormsbee (2017) and *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann (2018). Henderson explores how Ormsbee and Kann use ace identity to reimagine 'familiar tropes and structures' of YA romances, noting that YA is the field 'making notable ground when it comes to the representation of asexuality' (2019, p3). No explanation for this is suggested, though it may be reflective of the general diversity found within modern YA. Henderson is precisely interested in the notion of an ace coming-of-age narrative through romantic plotlines, and concludes that Ormsbee and Kann's romances 'subvert both the traditional heteronormative assumptions about love stories and misconceptions surrounding the 'impossibility' of love without sexual attraction' (p12). Henderson's

arguments are supported by Brunning and McKeever's observation that interest in romance and the development of sexuality is 'seen as a crucial part of becoming an adult' (2021, p511), i.e. of coming of age.

However, Henderson's findings are not especially relevant to this project as, for reasons I detail below, my novella is not an ace romance. Instead, my engagement with ace coming-of-age narratives is through the coming out process, which Anne Balay describes as 'a self-perpetuating metaphor' for coming-of-age (2012, p929). I go further than simply equating identity acceptance to attaining adulthood, through giving Tex and Kaleb very different experiences and attitudes towards coming out which are reflective of their life stages. Kaleb, whose parents we never meet, is more confident and independent than Tex, who is fairly subservient to his own parents: 'His father was Stilboni to the bone... On Stilbon, lines were toed' (p30). Kaleb is also very cynical about the way the Liber system works, whereas Tex continues to naively trust his parents' opinions and portraits of Stilbon and Federal politics until the weight of contradictory evidence proves too great. Correspondingly, Kaleb has a casual attitude towards coming out, telling Tex he doesn't care if he 'spread[s] everything' about his asexuality around their hometown 'as much as [he] like[s]' (p46), while Tex himself is far more hesitant. When Tex does come out to Kaleb, it is in tandem with his disillusionment with Stilbon and consideration of 'never return[ing] to Yereen' and his parents (p77), a more overt coming-of-age journey. These differing narratives also serve to demonstrate that ace experiences of identity development and coming out are far from monolithic, particularly for young people.

YA is also the ideal vehicle for exposing the existence and impacts of compulsory sexuality, as many scholars have noted its potential for driving positive social change. Silva and Savitz claim that YA could ‘disrupt socially constructed stereotypes’ and leave teenagers feeling ‘valued and respected’ (2019, p324), while Jaqueline Glasgow suggests that it can encourage teenagers to examine ‘alternative ways of understanding the world’ (2001, p54). YA could therefore have utility in exposing the existence of compulsory sexuality and causing teenagers to think critically about it, potentially combatting ace erasure and denigration. It may be overoptimistic to suggest that YA literature could eradicate acephobia and other impacts of compulsory sexuality on ace individuals, as Terry Norton and Jonatha Vare (2004) warn in relation to homophobia. Yet ace YA can still offer its readers validation, both for their experiences of compulsory sexuality, through an exploration of its impacts, and for their experiences of being ace, through acknowledgement of the diversity of the ace spectrum. *Accurate Data* fulfils both of these criteria, as detailed below.

### **Key ace YA texts: *Loveless* and ‘Sal & Gabi’**

As my focus is on exploring the impacts that compulsory sexuality has specifically on young ace lives, I am only concerned with YA texts that feature an ace character. Ace revisionist readings, or reading for ace resonances in the manner of Gupta and Cerankowski (2017), would not be suitable. To assess the current field, I have curated a sample of YA texts from the last decade featuring at least one, preferably teenage, ace character, with special effort made to select texts of the science fiction genre, as I also chose for *Accurate Data* to be a SF novella. I examined these texts using five criteria:

1. *Story*. Is the narrative primarily concerned with asexuality and ace issues?

2. *Identity*. Does the text explore the development of an ace identity, and its relation to compulsory sexuality, including issues such as hermeneutical injustice?
3. *Coming out*. Does a character come out as ace? Does the text explore related issues of compulsory sexuality such as pathologisation or denial of epistemic authority?
4. *Love*. Does the text explore ace notions of, or place an ace perspective upon, love, intimacy, or relationships? Does it explore related issues of compulsory sexuality such as social isolation, pressure to date, or difficulty maintaining relationships?
5. *Acephobia*. Does the text explore impacts of compulsory sexuality's denigration of asexuality? Are there instances of acephobia in the text, either within the narrative or the writing, such as dehumanisation?

I present this sample of texts as an appendix,<sup>3</sup> and have selected two for closer examination: *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020), and the 'Sal & Gabi' duology by Carlos Hernandez (2019, 2020). Together, these texts are ideally demonstrative of the current field, as they represent asexuality and explore the impacts of compulsory sexuality on young ace lives in quite different ways and for different target audiences. *Loveless* has the oldest characters in the sample and the correspondingly oldest YA audience: its characters leave secondary school and complete their first year of university. It also has the highest degree of focus on ace issues of all the sample texts, with the exploration of these issues comprising the entire narrative. The 'Sal & Gabi' duology

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<sup>3</sup> I also include specific non-YA ace SF texts that I reference later in this essay.

meanwhile features characters aged twelve and thirteen, and is marketed as children's fiction, though I maintain that it shares more than enough features with YA to be considered so for the purposes of this project. The duology has a much lower degree of engagement with asexuality and ace issues than *Loveless*, though not the lowest of the texts in the sample. Importantly, it does explore impacts of compulsory sexuality on young ace lives, but does so often indirectly, keeping this almost fully separate to the narrative.

*Loveless* follows Georgia, the narrator, through her first year at an English university, and is entirely focused on the experience of being an ace teenager and problems encountered as a result of compulsory sexuality. Georgia befriends her party-girl roommate, Rooney, who pressures her into dating her best friend, Jason, in order to have the 'complete' university experience, harming both friendships. Georgia is assigned a mentor, Sunil, who is openly ace, starting her on a pathway to discovering she is aro ace and learning to accept herself and her identity.

The development of Georgia's ace identity corresponds with a template proposed by Robbins et al (2016): identity confusion before discovery of terminology and education, then adoption of a salient ace identity, coming out, and integration of being ace into overall self-identity. During this process, Georgia grieves for the life she thought she would have, and feels 'angry at the world for making [her] hate who [she] was' (Oseman, 2020, p298), an acknowledgement of how compulsory sexuality marginalises and makes lesser non-sexuality. Asexual erasure and resulting hermeneutical injustice make it difficult for Georgia to come out to Rooney, who denies her the epistemic authority to define her own identity and persuades Georgia

to kiss her for validation, reflecting Brunning and McKeever's (2021) finding that the silencing of asexuality can put ace individuals at risk of sexual harassment. Georgia also feels unable to come out to her family, after witnessing them harass and pathologise her cousin for being single. Other issues explored include difficulty maintaining relationships, as Georgia's ill-fated attempt at romance causes rifts in her friendships, and social isolation, as she recalls feeling forced to fake a crush to fit in at school and is pitied for revealing that she's never kissed anyone. The former president of the university Pride society also expresses acephobic remarks, reflecting how even queer communities are not necessarily welcoming spaces for ace individuals, perhaps for similar reasons as asexuality has been neglected by queer theory, such as fear of oppressive desexualisation.

Overall, *Loveless* could easily be called the archetypal ace 'problem novel', a term used by YA researchers Melanie Koss and William Teale for texts which primarily deal 'with social issues that affect teens', rather than teens 'dealing with typical teenage life' (2009, p567). *Loveless* is very much a text concerned with the issues of compulsory sexuality that affect ace teens—its plot concerns Georgia developing an ace identity, and all conflict stems from issues with the erasure and denigration of asexuality. In Cart and Jenkins's terms, it is a novel of ace visibility, failing to fully establish a sense of ace community or to show ace individuals in a wider context, beyond their identity and the issues compulsory sexuality brings them. This is something I sought to avoid when writing *Accurate Data*, despite the novella still making a significant intervention for a range of ace issues.

My second key text selection was therefore important in exemplifying an alternative way of engaging with asexuality and compulsory sexuality. Hernandez's 'Sal & Gabi' duology of SF novels, *Sal & Gabi Break The Universe* (2019) and *Sal & Gabi Fix The Universe* (2020), follows Sal, a Cuban-American middle school student with the ability to access alternate universes. In the first book, Sal and his friend Gabi use Sal's powers to save the life of Gabi's ailing infant brother; in the second, they team up with versions of Gabi from alternate universes to stop the evil antics of a rogue Gabi. While the books are presented and marketed as children's fiction, many features of YA can be identified: relatable issues of bullying and grief, autonomy of thought and action displayed by the protagonists, and all three of Silva and Savitz's themes of non-stereotypical depictions of teenagers.

Although Sal does not ever explicitly identify as ace, he can be confidently read as ace to enough of an extent to qualify him as such for the purposes of this thesis. His statements that he 'do[esn't] think [he's] ready for dating' (2019, p231) and is 'not a sexual being yet' (p335) read more as ace- than age-related in context. Hernandez also heavily implies that Sal is ace: Gabi teases Sal that he has a crush on her, and Sal begins to explain that he doesn't have those kinds of feelings for anyone, causing Gabi to remark that 'if [he] were any more aro, [she]'d shoot [him] out of a bow' (p370). By declaring Sal as ace, it is therefore possible to ask why he does not identify as such—is it age, as he claims, or is it that he does not feel that being ace is salient or relevant to his overall identity? Perhaps it is a combination of the two: he is still young enough that his age excuse works in response to a question about dating, and the people closest to him accept him as he is, as when his stepmother rephrases talk of Sal dating

in terms of if, not when. Sal is therefore mostly shielded from negative impacts of compulsory sexuality, and so may not have much cause to develop an ace identity.

Importantly, this duology showcases substantial impacts of compulsory sexuality within the sphere of romance, which given the age of the target audience, is consistent with what Przybylo observes about queer theory: under compulsory sexuality, children's future sexuality is presumed. Throughout, there is the (heteronormative) presumption of romantic intent in actions which are not intended by the actor(s) as romantic. For example, when Sal tells his stepmother about his new friend Gabi, she decides he must have a crush on her. Although minor, this presumption causes Sal and Gabi annoyance and frustration, and interplays with the elevation of romance above friendship, which can lead to difficulty maintaining relationships and social isolation for ace teenagers. Sal's stepmother unintentionally reinforces compulsory sexuality when she uses 'just' to describe friendship in comparison to romance (2019, p231), and later she and Sal's father heavily imply that if Gabi was Sal's romantic partner, he would have to offer her greater respect than he offers her as a friend. In this way, Hernandez demonstrates how the effects and impacts of compulsory sexuality can be subtly acknowledged and explored without making them the subject of the narrative, or drawing attention to them in a way that diverts unnecessarily and distractingly from that narrative.

### ***Accurate Data as a YA novella***

*Loveless* and 'Sal & Gabi' exemplify how current ace YA texts explore and represent asexuality and compulsory sexuality. I was able to use observations of them and the other texts in my sample to carve a unique niche for my own novella.

First, Oseman and Hernandez demonstrate two ends on a scale of how much focus to place on ace issues within a narrative, and *Accurate Data* lies somewhere between them. Unlike *Loveless*, ace issues are not the central focus and driving force, but neither are they given the glancing, verging on coincidental attention ‘Sal & Gabi’ affords them. I place my ace characters in the contexts of three societies—Stilbon with entrenched compulsory sexuality, Yereen with allonormativity, and the Astro community with aronormativity—and the impacts of these systems on their lives are addressed, but the wider narrative consists of an adventure quest to deliver something (the robot, Flak) to a goal (the court on Stilbon). Additionally, issues of compulsory sexuality are the main cause of conflict in *Loveless* but provide no conflict at all in ‘Sal & Gabi’. In *Accurate Data*, meanwhile, conflict stems from injustice and authoritarianism, with numerous smaller-scale conflicts that do concern compulsory sexuality. For example, the allonormative expectations of Tex’s Stilboni heritage lead him to fear that being single would dishonour his family, causing him to experience internal conflict as he develops an ace identity. Norms of Stilboni compulsory sexuality also feed in to his interpersonal conflict with Kaleb, as they argue over the nature of Kaleb’s relationship with Melina. This allows me to fulfil my project aims without creating a ‘problem novel’ or being didactic, and also allows *Accurate Data* to recognise that compulsory sexuality can have significant impacts on ace teenagers’ lives *without* being central to them—something that *Loveless* fails to acknowledge.

This leads into a second point: that compulsory sexuality can also affect ace individuals for whom being ace is not central to their identity. Hernandez demonstrates this to a degree through Sal, and I through the character of Reiko, who is also twelve. Whether

Reiko is ace is never made clear, which may encourage the reader to think about ace identity and what it means to be asexual and/or aromantic. Even so, Reiko's declaration that she will never date, and a general disinterest in and detachment from ideas of crushes and dating that can allow her to be read as ace, mean that she is open to being impacted by compulsory sexuality, and her age thus allows an exploration of how these impacts can be felt even in childhood. Reiko considers pretending to have a crush on Tex, someone as unobtainable as a celebrity crush in Western culture, in order to 'get her mam off her back about *boys and girls*' (p57), demonstrating that pressure to date is experienced in childhood. Her outspoken stubbornness also results in her questioning Tex's submissiveness to others, reflecting the idea shared by many asexuality scholars that ace individuals should be more openly critical of compulsory sexuality and the ways it negatively impacts their lives.

Similarly, my character Melina is aromantic but doesn't claim this as an identity: in line with Dawson et al's research, she sees it 'as an attribute of marginal importance, not centrality, to [her] sense of self' (2016, p273). This is in part because her ambition is to become an Astro, joining a culture well-known for being aronormative, which 'cover[s] everything that need[s] covering, for her' (p65). It also shields her from many of the impacts of compulsory sexuality and allonormativity that might otherwise drive her to seek the validation and commonality of an ace identity, which she shows awareness of: 'life in space was easier for her, in many ways, than life on Yereen' (p66). However, Melina is not shielded from compulsory sexuality entirely. On Yereen, her only non-familial connection is with Kaleb, who is also ace. Conversely, on Fortitude, the heart of the ace community where being ace is presumed, she has a wide social circle, highlighting her social isolation in Yereen's allonormative society. Instead of emulating

Kaleb's hatred of Tex, Melina also forms her own opinion of him, demonstrating her tendency to defy the status quo and choose her own path. This ultimately leads to her questioning Astro aronormativity as she resolves to continue her relationship with Kaleb, supporting notions of ace intimate relationships as 'true love' and reflecting how this must be fought for under any regulatory or normative system of sexuality, including compulsory sexuality.

The majority of the YA texts in my sample feature only one ace character, narrowing their scope to show the diversity present within the ace spectrum, and therefore to acknowledge that the impacts of compulsory sexuality on young ace lives can differ on the individual level. Instead, *Accurate Data* features three diverse ace protagonists with chapters written from each of their points of view, as well as three characters who can be read as ace: Reiko, Gareth, who enjoys the aronormativity of the Astro community, and Santiago, who bemoans being prevented from adopting a child by a state that 'just do[es]n't like people being different' (p101). This places the majority of the novella's cast within the ace spectrum, a contrast to most YA novels that are largely or entirely composed of allosexual characters. All of my characters have different identities, backgrounds, and ideas of what it means to be ace, and all are affected by compulsory sexuality and allonormativity in differing ways. By reflecting ace diversity in this way, it may be possible to counter Mollet's observation that allonormativity causes ace young people to doubt the validity of their identities and ask 'Am I really asexual? Am I asexual enough?' (2020, p200).

In a further break from past YA texts, I chose to write *Accurate Data* using third person free indirect style. Both *Loveless* and 'Sal & Gabi' are narrated in the first person by

their ace protagonists, Georgia and Sal, which allows them to exhibit these characters' experiences in the greatest possible depth. However, this would not work for *Accurate Data*, as I would either need to select a sole narrator from my four protagonists, lessening my ability to explore the experiences of the remainder, or offer a multiplicity of first person accounts, which in the shorter length of a novella could result in confusion for the reader. Third person narration was the logical conclusion, so my use of free indirect style provides a compromise, enabling me to provide the reader with as close an insight into the lives and thoughts of my ace protagonists as possible. I can therefore vary character perspectives, providing the opportunity for variations of tone, while keeping a consistent voice and style. While the perspectives of Melina, Tex and Kaleb are largely serious, much like Georgia's in *Loveless*, Reiko's is deliberately more irreverent and humorous, reminiscent of Sal's in 'Sal & Gabi', to provide contrast, interest, and relief. This corresponds to Koss and Teale's observation that YA texts often use humour in a similar way to 'diffuse difficult-to-discuss topics' (2009, p568), which (a)sexuality and especially the negative impacts of compulsory sexuality can be.

Additionally, my sample of YA texts highlighted an unexplained gender imbalance: most ace non-protagonist characters in the sample are male, but most ace protagonists are female. Interestingly, this imbalance recalls Bogaert's 2004 finding that more women can be identified as asexual than men. Gupta speculates that this may be because it is easier for women to identity as ace under norms of compulsory sexuality, due to an image of 'women as 'naturally' less sexual than men' (2019, p1200), and of 'male heterosexuality as ever-present and animalistic' (p1198): ace women are seen to conform to stereotypical norms, and ace men to defy them.

However, these differences do not appear to translate into different experiences of

compulsory sexuality. The specific impacts that Gupta's male interviewees reported experiencing are also experienced by ace women, including in Gupta's study, while impacts experienced only by ace women were confined to romantic relationships, and judged by Gupta to be the same as many allosexual women experience, such as feeling the need to please a partner. As such, Gupta states that 'it is female aromanticism [...] that is in true conflict with [...] feminine sexual norms' (p1207), not female asexuality. This may further explain why many ace female characters in my sample were alloromantic, as this is less in conflict with established norms than female aromanticism and male asexuality. Instead of continuing this gender imbalance, *Accurate Data* features both male and female ace protagonists and non-protagonists, including Melina as a female aromantic character in line with Gupta's observations, and Kaleb and Tex, whose differing ace identities and experiences of compulsory sexuality allow for better representation of ace diversity than one male character would alone.

The key aspect of Kaleb's character is his aro ace identity: we learn that it is something that has protected him from allonormativity on Yereen, which would otherwise have left him feeling broken. Kaleb actively refuses to follow Stilboni rules and laws, reflecting how he as an ace individual does not conform to norms of compulsory sexuality. Alloromantic ace Tex, meanwhile, has had his freedom curtailed by Kaleb, who blackmails him, and his aunt Rhiannon, who has 'been running his life for years' (p31). Kaleb and Rhiannon are Yereenites, and so for Tex, running away to Stilbon becomes a way to regain his freedom. Eventually he comes to realise that Stilbon is no utopia and that he will find no freedom there, in part because of compulsory sexuality, which would compel him to sacrifice his life on the altar of a career as a socially

acceptable replacement for a normative relationship. Tex begins to reject Stilboni culture at the same time as developing his ace identity, which results in feelings that he doesn't 'belong on Yereen, or on Stilbon' (p116), demonstrating how ace individuals can feel alienated and isolated by compulsory sexuality and allonormative values. *Accurate Data* therefore shows how two characters from different backgrounds can experience similar feelings of alienation yet react to it in different ways: Kaleb by rebellion and clinging to his identity, and Tex by desperately seeking community and considering running away. This is not something achieved by previous ace YA texts, and is one way in which *Accurate Data* goes beyond previous representations of youth asexuality to better convey the diversity of youth ace experience.

Kaleb and Tex also facilitate the exploration of impacts of compulsory sexuality related to coming out. While the topic of coming out has been explored before in ace YA texts, *Loveless* in particular, they only consider the experiences of one individual. Instead, by exploring the coming out experiences of both Kaleb and Tex, I am able not only to again convey the diversity of experience, but also to explore two very different attitudes toward coming out as ace: Kaleb, who is confident and open, and Tex, who is hesitant. Robbins et al observe three motives for coming out as ace, which are all displayed here: 'response to pressure from family and friends, salience to personal identity, and membership in the asexual community' (2016, p753). When Kaleb comes out, it is entirely due to pressure from Tex amidst Tex's battle to force Kaleb to give him something that will counterbalance Kaleb's blackmail. However, the salience of being aro ace to his personal identity means that Kaleb is proud to be so, and more willing to come out than he may otherwise have been—it is understanding this that leads Tex to conclude that the information is worthless for purposes of extortion, as

Kaleb doesn't care who knows. When Tex comes out in turn, it is partly a stage of his overall process of identity development, but also a quest to find commonality with someone else and find membership of an (albeit small) ace community. His nervousness leads Kaleb to recall being denied epistemic authority on coming out as ace in the past, either due to age, 'he was too young, and would change his mind when he got older', or to effects of ace erasure and denigration, 'he was a prude, a closet Stilboni, for finding talk of sex repulsive' (p114). Although he hates Tex, Kaleb has compassion, and chooses to break the cycle of negativity and offer Tex a better experience than he had, 'to think of what he'd want Tex to say to him, if their positions were reversed' (p115). Where Kaleb had to explain himself and his identity, Tex is able to convey it in a simple word; where Kaleb was denied the epistemic authority to understand and define himself, Tex receives quiet, neutral support. This shows the importance of combatting ace erasure and silencing through spreading awareness and understanding of asexuality and demonstrates how ace individuals can combat compulsory sexuality and its impacts even without political activism.

The order in which these characters are introduced, and how, is important to the narrative of *Accurate Data*, and reflects their roles both within the novella's story and in its exploration of asexuality and compulsory sexuality. Melina is the first protagonist introduced, as the core narrative consists of her quest to acquit her mother. She is also the foundation of the novella, the character who unites the others and keeps them on a shared path: when she leaves the group to go to the court, 'they [are] leaderless' (p103). Her piloting ambitions and subsequent links to the aronormative Astro community also mean that the existence of this society can be seeded from the start of the novella, making Melina the ideal protagonist for readers to first get to know. Reiko

is introduced soon after, but her perspective isn't used until much later, and much less than any of the other protagonists. This is a subtle reflection of how her younger age gives her a greater chance of being denied epistemic authority—i.e. not being listened to—by others, and of how childhood asexuality is understudied and often dismissed. On a more practical level, that Reiko's age also shields her from many impacts of compulsory sexuality makes her perspective the least valuable to my research.

Melina introduces the reader to Kaleb, as the first person she calls when she needs help. This demonstrates the closeness of their relationship, discussed in depth below, and unlike Reiko, the reader is immediately provided with narration from Kaleb's perspective, helping to cement the sense that he is an important character, both to the narrative and to its exploration of asexuality and compulsory sexuality. Kaleb in turn introduces Tex: the final protagonist, and Kaleb's last resort. There is a small gap between the introduction of Tex and the provision of his perspective, giving him an air of mystery consistent with the blackmail storyline he is involved in. Being the last protagonist also reflects that he is the odd one out, the one who feels he does not belong, both in this group of characters and as an ace individual in a culture of compulsory sexuality. Ultimately, it helps to imply that he is the true focus of the novella: though the core narrative is about Melina, it is Tex's journey of character and ace identity development that creates conflict and drives much of the story, and which is also the focus of many of my aims for this project.

Finally, there is the question of romance and romantic plotlines, a mainstay of YA fiction across genres. I return now to my aforementioned decision to not include romantic subplots in *Accurate Data*. This was partly to defy the pressure that

compulsory sexuality places on young people to date, which disproportionately negatively affects those ace teenagers who do not and will never desire a romantic relationship and/or be interested in dating. In addition, this decision marks a departure from many previous ace YA novels, including *Loveless* and those studied by Henderson, which engage with traditional romance. The only instance of romance in *Accurate Data* comes from Tex recalling his experience with his ex-boyfriend Adrian, who ended their relationship when Tex refused to incorporate a sexual component. As this is a common impact of compulsory sexuality on the lives of romance-desiring ace individuals, I reasoned that it was important to acknowledge it in the novella, and to explore how this experience impacted and shaped Tex's life in other ways, such as driving his single-minded pursuit of a law career on Stilbon. Because of his bad experience with Adrian, Tex believes that he will always fail in romance, and that if Kaleb takes this chance at a career away from him, he will ultimately 'fail himself' (p81). I also use Kaleb to show that difficulty maintaining relationships can apply outside of romance: Kaleb doesn't try making friends on Yereen as eventually the topics of sex and attraction 'always cropped up, and Kaleb had grown tired of pretending or explaining himself—and tired of the reactions that got' (p114). This contributes to his social isolation, a further impact of compulsory sexuality that Tex also experiences: 'with Melina at court, all Tex had was Kaleb' (p116).

Rather than perpetuate amatonormativity by adding to the canon of ace YA romances, I instead use *Accurate Data* to present an ace notion of a non-sexual, non-romantic intimate relationship, subverting traditional assumptions of intimacy and placing a unique slant on the intimate relationship plotline. Kaleb and Melina have a committed intimate, aromantic ace partnership—were it not for Kaleb's phobia of space, and

Melina's piloting ambitions, they would be planning a life together. In this way, their relationship could be compared to the notion of 'star-crossed lovers', usually applied to romantic relationships, further distinguishing it from friendship. Because of this distinction, they experience specific impacts of compulsory sexuality, one of which is the presumption of romantic intent. Tex assumes that their relationship is romantic because of the care Kaleb shows for Melina, the quiet physical intimacy they display, and the sacrifices he makes for her: 'That's not just a friendship' (p44). Hernandez engages with this impact of compulsory sexuality, but Kaleb and Melina suffer it more acutely, again because of compulsory sexuality. Sal and Gabi can deny that they have a relationship because their friendship lies within normative bounds; as a result of silencing and hermeneutical injustice, Kaleb and Melina lack the language needed to explain that they do have a relationship, as it lies outside of normative bounds by not conforming to binary categories of romantic/sexual or friendship. Tex does not believe Melina is Kaleb's friend, because she is not, but equally Kaleb cannot call her his girlfriend 'because if [he] say[s] that she is, [Tex]'ll make assumptions that aren't true' (p45). This is reminiscent of Belsey's assertion that 'desire eludes final definition' (1994, p3), which is practically inconvenient and frustrating. Tex calls it 'complicated', but Melina sums up the issue by correcting him that it is 'just different from what most people expect when you say you're in a relationship' (p78). Compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity also elevate romance, suggesting that their relationship is taken more seriously when it is erroneously assumed to be romantic, leading Kaleb to ensure that Tex knows that 'just because a relationship doesn't look the way Stilbon thinks it should, it doesn't mean it's any less of one' (p45) when telling him that the relationship is not romantic.

As the narrative introduces Tex into their relationship dynamic, it can also be examined within the context of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of triangular relationships. Observing that the sexual and non-sexual affect the distribution of other forms of societal power, Sedgwick uses the notion of triangular relationships to examine the association between power and male homosocial desire in a literary context. 'In any erotic rivalry,' she states, 'the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved' ([1985] 2016, p21), with the beloved chosen specifically because they are the choice of the rival. In *Accurate Data*, Kaleb sees Tex, who is already his rival in other matters, as a rival for Melina's attention, expressing feelings of jealousy usually consistent with romantic possessiveness. This is emphasised by his lack of jealousy towards Gareth: as part of an aronormative culture that does not distinguish between romantic and non-romantic when weighing relationships, Gareth will not seek any sort of committed intimate relationship with Melina, whereas Tex has no such cultural values and can offer Melina something that Kaleb cannot, in being able to follow her to space. Tex's feelings towards Melina are ambivalent, and he is not interested in pursuing any form of intimate connection with her, but as Kaleb views and treats him as a rival, this dynamic could be regarded as an ace variation of Sedgwick's erotic triangle. Kaleb and Tex are motivated by power, with their animosity preventing them from sharing Melina and leading them to compete, but there is no sexual motivation—by taking Lorde's view of the erotic as not bound to sex, there need not be one. As this involves no gendered attraction, be it sexual or romantic, the gender of the beloved becomes irrelevant, demonstrating that Sedgwick's ideas can be applied beyond their original scope. This again shows how an ace perspective could enhance critical theory, and contributes to the ace broadening of understandings of intimacy.

### III. Ace science fiction

*Accurate Data* also utilises the science fiction genre, which has a strong history of questioning norms of sexuality: in the words of Adriana Jimenez Rodríguez, SF ‘does practically the same thing to literature that queer does to theory’ (2017, p43). Wendy Pearson provides an exploration of SF’s connection with queer theory, asking if it is possible to conceive of a SF ‘that is not defined in advance by its relationship to [...] sexual difference and to sexuality’ (2003a, p300), and comparing queer theory’s goal of radical societal reconstruction to SF’s task of revealing the ‘unthinking assumptions that limit human potentiality’ (2003b, p159). Yet she also notes that SF has not always lived up to this claim, and has often perpetuated heteronormativity, for example by simply ‘giv[ing] the hero a fiancée’ (p150) or even using non-normative sexualities and relationships to ‘represent the decadence and emotional emptiness’ of cyberpunk worlds (2003a, p304).

However, as Patricia Melzer explains, SF’s ‘tendency to estrange the given world’ (2017, p398) does allow it to be used to subvert and transgress prevailing norms. Melzer offers the examples of cybersex queering notions of desire, and aliens as positing alternatives to binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, but I also provide several examples of SF resonating with asexuality and the impacts of compulsory sexuality. First, as Victor Grech, Clare Vasallo and Ivan Callus explore, there are many SF instances of state regulation of population levels, i.e. of (official) regulatory systems of sexuality. One example they give is of a compulsorily asexual society in *Star Trek* (‘The Apple’ 1967), in which ‘alien denizens [...] have no knowledge of sex’ (Grech et al 2012a, p43). Similarly, the *Star Wars* franchise features a compulsorily aromantic

society in the form of the Jedi order, as Jedi are instructed to relinquish all individual attachments to others. This doctrine of non-attachment also displays elements of compulsory sexuality, as it elevates romantic relationships above friendships: marriage is forbidden, but close friendships are not. Meanwhile, in Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 'the society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and its continuity, is without sex' ([1969] 2017, p93), and compulsory sexuality is absent. Indeed, Gethenians view the alien narrator, Genly Ai, as hailing from 'a society of perverts' (p36) for his ability to desire and engage in sexual behaviours at whim. Genly's relationship with Estraven can also be viewed through the lens of ace broadenings of intimacy, as 'a friendship that [...] might as well be called [...] love' which grows not from sexual intimacy but 'from the distance between [them]' (p249).

### **Imagined societies of *Accurate Data***

Just as these SF societies, so wildly different from our Western culture, can function to highlight and transgress aspects of compulsory sexuality, so I use SF's limitless potentiality to present three imagined societies that facilitate the exploration of the impacts compulsory sexuality has on young ace lives. Leah Zaidi describes how SF worldbuilding can be used to 'challenge societal values without antagonizing protected values' (2019, p18). This means that I can use it to combat asexual erasure, presenting societies that are similar enough to our own to illuminate contemporary impacts of compulsory sexuality, but different enough to demonstrate 'an alternative political reality, what it means to live within that reality, and possibly how to challenge that status quo' (p20). Like YA, there is the hope that SF can be an implement for exposing compulsory sexuality and positively altering perceptions of asexuality.

Each of my societies was deliberately designed to be familiar to the reader, with the intention that familiarity in most aspects of the setting, such as climate and architecture, would place more of a spotlight on the crucial parts of the novella that may be less familiar to readers: ace experiences of an allonormative world. Yet using the SF genre remained important, as it offered me the freedom to present societies specifically tailored to enable the best possible exploration of compulsory sexuality and its impacts on young ace lives, and to create an entirely imagined society to explore the notion of aronormativity and what it could mean for ace individuals. Placing each society on a different planet or in space itself allowed me to make clear demarcations between compulsory sexuality and allonormativity, reflecting how these concepts should be considered distinctly within and beyond asexuality studies. Furthermore, attracting readers is crucial to using ace visibility to combat asexual erasure and denigration, so I chose to give *Accurate Data's* setting a retro quality in keeping with the resurgence of pop culture from the 80s and 90s, seen in popular SF properties such as *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline (2011) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). A space setting may also be attractive to YA readers given renewed attention to space exploration with NASA's collaboration with SpaceX and planned lunar missions.

The first society in *Accurate Data* is Stilbon, the capital planet of the Liber star system, which exhibits entrenched compulsory sexuality. The existence of such a society is necessary for the exploration of the impacts of compulsory sexuality, and fits with Daniel Baker's assertion that presenting similar-yet-different versions of our own culture can use representations of 'reality as it truly is' to provoke 'shock, then dissatisfaction, [then] the desire to change' (2012, p449). In other words, SF can thus

'mak[e] visible reality's dehumanizing aspects' (p456), such as the marginalisation of asexuality under compulsory sexuality. Stilboni society values success, and sees singlehood as failure, consistent with Belsey's observation that a view of sexuality as natural makes 'disappointment in love [...] our failure, the consequence of an afflicted personality' (1994 p5), and that single people are 'seen by the right as deviant and culpable' (p6). In both cases, compulsory sexuality results in the denigration of asexuality, the pathologisation and marginalisation of ace individuals, and acephobia. Tex observes that for him as a Stilboni, singlehood is unacceptable unless he is able to prove that he is 'successful in other ways, such as having an important career' (p79). If he cannot, he risks 'bring[ing] shame and scorn on [himself] and [his] family' (p80), so he dedicates himself to becoming a lawyer. When this seems in doubt, he considers running away, showing how pressure to conform to the norms of compulsory sexuality can potentially have a huge impact on young ace lives.

The idea of a state tying relationships to success finds support from Foucault, as explored by Simon During. During notes that the family is seen by the state as 'the institution that underpins social welfare' (1992 p168), and that it requires individuals to be 'emotionally stable subjects capable of strong interpersonal relations—that is, capable of domestic stability and love' (p169). This explains why the Stilboni state would take such an interest in its citizens' relationship statuses, and why it might find asexuality, and especially aromanticism, undesirable. Thus, Stilboni compulsory sexuality can be demonstrated through the work of Emens, who notes that the existence of compulsory sexuality can be revealed by an examination of Western legal systems, which '[privilege] sexuality as specially important to human lives' (2014 p374). This is implied via Santiago, who is prevented from adopting as she has no

partner and therefore only one income. The grounds for such a law are financial, but it impacts a larger proportion of aromantic individuals than alloromantic, consistent with Emens's observations.

Stilbon is presented as a society of two halves, rural and urban, illustrating an inequality that parallels that within compulsory sexuality. The countryside is arranged in carefully demarcated fields, while in the city of Trivers, nature is found only in a park, representing the unnoticed regulation of compulsory sexuality. Stilboni culture is also presented as highly individualistic: 'Stilboni philosophy was every one for themselves' (p97). This is consistent with Belsey's assertion that our own culture, which marginalises non-sexuality, 'privileges private life and personal experience over every other kind of satisfaction' (1994, p5). The other side of such a culture is that those who are marginalised by and do not fit into the mainstream are left behind, so that on Stilbon, 'nobody looks out for [them] except [themselves]' (p100), symbolic of the importance of the ace community in the face of compulsory sexuality. Stilboni conservative values are also reflected in the low-tech, analogue qualities of this vision of the future, which features radio, bicycles, and data cables.

The second society in *Accurate Data* is that of Yereen, the home planet of the protagonists and consequently the culture most explored in the narrative. Yereen is very different to Stilbon, while still exhibiting allonormative and amatonormative elements and values. Compared to Stilbon, Yereen's landscape is wilder and untamed, with 'dirt and gravel [over] asphalt and concrete' (p22), as allonormativity is not as rigid and oppressive for ace individuals as compulsory sexuality. Yereen also values freedom, particularly freedom from Stilbon, further emphasising the difference

between compulsory sexuality and allonormativity. This is exemplified by Reiko's love of rap music, a genre contemporary teenage readers can immediately associate with free expression and societal critique. Yet Yereen also greatly values social wealth in the absence of financial, making any social norms more potent for the ace characters who live there: 'Stilboni interference aside, freedom on Yereen wasn't limitless' (p23). As such, 'all roads [lead] to the spaceport' (p31), as for characters like Melina and Tex, the only escape from allonormativity is to go to space, to the Astros, where it is absent.

Finally, the aronormative society of Astros is composed of people who live and work in space, such as pilots and workers on the space station Fortitude. Aronormativity makes logical sense for Astro society, as even today, long periods of distance in jobs such as piloting and international haulage can make it difficult to sustain long-term relationships: 'relationships were generally unworkable in space, so the spacefaring lifestyle attracted the kind of person who didn't have those interests' (p65). Parallels can be drawn between Astro society as an ace community, and the contemporary ace community. For example, spaceships are designed for pilots and co-pilots, but the latter have been made 'largely obsolete' (p62) due to technological advancement, leaving pilots alone in their cockpits. This mirrors Western society's assumption that people will partner up, resulting in norms that marginalise and socially isolate those who do not. Furthermore, Astros are described as 'a scattered enclave, alone but for each other' (p62) as others cannot understand why they would want to live as they do, reflecting how ace individuals are frequently met with a lack of understanding, resulting in denigration, pathologisation, and denial of epistemic authority. I also emphasise the importance of Astro community, symbolic of the importance of

community to many ace individuals as validation and commonality in the face of compulsory sexuality.

There is plenty within asexuality studies and existing SF that supports the idea that ace individuals would find themselves at an advantage in the space industry. Emens suggests that ‘an employment niche [...] that could favour asexual candidates’ (2014, p358) could be emerging in many fields, and with the prospect of long missions to Mars, space could be one of them. Tim Pratt writes in his ace SF novel *The Wrong Stars* (2017) that ship captains dislike relationships between crewmembers for fear of potentially complicated situations, while in Heather Kaczynski’s ace YA SF novel *Dare Mighty Things*, the protagonist is repeatedly assured that being ace is ‘probably an advantage’ (2017, p96) in her quest for astronaut selection: she will not fraternise with her future crewmates, will not be leaving any significant other behind, and is unlikely to be distracted by the attractiveness of the other astronaut candidates. The ethics of such an appropriation of asexuality in the labour market are debateable, but it does support the idea of a future space-based society like that of the Astros.

As Belsey asserts, ‘to reverse the values of a binary opposition is to leave the terms of the opposition in place’ (1994, p6), and Astro aronormativity has both positive and negative impacts for my ace characters. Melina’s aromanticism aligns with her goal of becoming an Astro, a society into which she is welcomed as she is, while the common knowledge of Astro aronormativity frees her from the pressures of amatonormativity on Yereen. The presumption of aromanticism also means that many of the impacts of compulsory sexuality simply do not exist: there is no pressure to date or pathologisation, and no need to come out as ace or aromantic, additionally eliminating

denial of epistemic authority. Melina observes that the lack of presumption of romantic intent, as all actions are assumed to be non-romantic, also makes forming friendships easier, lessening social isolation. As exemplified by Gareth's warnings to Melina about the importance of her relationship with Kaleb, neither are romantic relationships elevated above other intimate relationships. However, the negative consequence for Melina of Astro aromanticity is that there are few people who can advise her about how to handle the distance from Kaleb once she joins the community. Most Astros have not been in her position: those who are in relationships 'fl[y] on the same ship[s]' (p79) and so do not face such a problem, while the Wilhelm Gareth mentions ended his relationship with a non-Astro upon going to space. The rest are uninterested in romantic relationships, which implies that Melina and Kaleb's intimate aromantic partnership is a novelty. Despite the fact that this may not be fully believable for a far-future society, I judge that the value of reflecting and calling attention to the contemporary lack of understanding and recognition of such relationships is worth any potential accusations of anachronism.

Astro society is centred on the service station Fortitude, a name which symbolises the courage needed to inhabit an asteroid, and to reject allonormativity, as the Astros do in *Accurate Data*, and many ace individuals do in Western society by coming out and/or not conforming to norms of compulsory sexuality. Juxtaposed with the emptiness of space, Fortitude is an oasis of life, just as ace community offers ace individuals a haven amidst the loneliness that amatonormativity can cause. The freight dome of the station, the heart of the Astro domain, is shown to be much better maintained than the rest of Fortitude and decorated with iconography of 'all shades and cultures' (p61), representing the care needed to sustain such a community and the

diversity within the ace spectrum. Making the Astros more a community than a fully-fledged society reflects the contemporary marginalisation and erasure of asexuality, as the Astros are limited to a small artificially created space outpost rather than having their own planet, which compulsorily sexual Stilbon and allonormative Yereen enjoy.

The spacecraft *Parisian* provides a bridge between these three societies, where elements of each culture exist through Tex, Kaleb and Reiko, and Melina. At first, descriptions of the *Parisian* as broken, 'dingy and cold' (p42) help to form the image of space as barren, frightening, and lonely that contrasts with the brightness of Fortitude. After leaving Fortitude, once Astro culture has shown the reader an alternative perspective on space as embodying possibility, and offered hope that allonormativity is not universal, the *Parisian* comes to be described differently. For example, all of the characters eat together at a round table, a traditional symbol of equality, and while in the cockpit, Tex comes to see space as having 'befriended him with its promises of eternal onward motion, and infinite discovery' (p81), as metaphors for his own liberation in developing an ace identity. Thus, *Accurate Data* rejects any notion that the impacts of compulsory sexuality mean that ace individuals would be better off if they were to conform to its allo- and amatonormative values. Tex begins to wonder if conforming would 'be the solution he needed it to be' (p101): if it would bring him happiness, or embitter him as it has Santiago. He asks, 'was there another path?' (p101). The idea that there could be is touched upon in existing ace YA texts, specifically *Loveless*, but *Accurate Data* goes further than Kaleb's simple assertion to Tex that 'you belong where you want to belong' (p116). Melina and Kaleb's relationship is an example of 'another path', as ultimately, Melina decides to defy all

normative expectations and ‘hold on to [Kaleb]’, regardless of consequences, as ‘that was what you did when you loved someone’ (p107).

### **Dehumanisation of asexuality**

Though SF provides many opportunities for the exploration of asexuality within the context of compulsory sexuality, it also carries dangers—most specifically, that of the dehumanisation of asexuality in a genre which often features non-human characters. The dehumanisation of ace people has been noted in Western society by Sarah Doan-Minh, who states that ‘those who reject sex are viewed as less than or not even human’ (2019, p173), while a study led by Mark Hoffarth into the relationship between acephobia and right-wing authoritarianism reported that ‘asexuals were denied uniquely human traits [...] and human nature traits’, and called ‘animalistic’ or ‘machine-like’ (2016, p89). SF has frequently perpetuated these views. As Ashley Barr observes, asexuality in SF is often ‘associated with the absence of [...] human emotion’, with ‘characteristics that are marked as inhuman or machine-like’ (2019, p52).

Sexuality is marketed as a core human trait, meaning that, for instance, cyborgs are humanised through ‘the establishment of clearly defined, normative sexual attraction and desire’ (p46), as in *Blade Runner* (1982). The quality of asexuality is made a quality of the non-human, and ace individuals are implied to be somehow less human than machines as a consequence, a clear example of asexual denigration.

Instances of this dehumanisation are present in many SF texts with prominent ace representation, including ace protagonists and narrators. The ace narrator of Laura Pohl’s *The Last 8* (2019) is revealed to have alien DNA, the sole ace character in Yoon Ha Lee’s *Revenant Gun* (2017) is a sociopath, and the ace representation in Becky

Chamber's 'Wayfarers' series takes the form of an alien race (2021). Additionally, one of Pratt's ace characters is horrifically and permanently fused to another, while in Emma Newman's *Atlas Alone* (2019), the ace narrator describes herself as 'a cold collection of trained responses, pretending to be a person' (p233)—when an artificial intelligence (AI) takes control of her body in the manner of a radio-controlled robot, nobody notices. In other texts, the allosexuality of non-human characters serves to emphasise the asexuality of human ace characters, including Claudia Gray's Geode, who is due to enter 'his next mating smelt' despite being a rock (2021, p208), and Hernandez's AI toilet and AI entropy sweeper, who get married, are given 'the talk', and confess to having 'certain needs' (2020, p388).

I address this negative trend in two ways. First, I acknowledge and decry the dehumanisation of ace individuals, through problematizing negative views of the Astros. Tex's father believes that 'space makes them cold' and heartless (p30), and Tex himself credits their famous aromanticism for their 'less pleasant nickname, the Aliens' (p78). Even Kaleb expresses confusion that they would prefer space to 'the ground humans had evolved to inhabit' (p24), implying that by rejecting something integral to human existence, they are somehow not fully human—an evident parallel to erroneous views of ace individuals 'rejecting' sexual norms. All of these views are presented in a way that delegitimises them: Tex's father also tells his son to romantically pursue Melina, which the reader and Tex know is foolish, Tex's observation of the Astro's nickname also references the childish image of 'little green men' from outer space (p78), and Kaleb's viewpoint is rendered unreliable in context due to his phobia of space travel. Kaleb also directly rejects the dehumanisation of ace

individuals through comparisons to robots, stating himself that ‘his interest lay in people, not machines’ (p39).

Secondly, I use the character of Flak, a non-sapient robot, to contrast with my human ace characters and emphasise not their asexuality, but their humanity. Flak is not an AI, and it is not illogical to suggest that there would be no advanced AI in the far future, with concerns that it is potentially dangerous, its negative portrayal in popular SF media, and even ethical concerns around the enslavement of sapient life. Flak is ‘incapable of feeling’ (p117), able to ‘think’ only in making logical judgements of how to most efficiently adhere to its programming, which is an important part of *Accurate Data’s* narrative. It is treated, appropriately, as an object rather than a being: Melina calls it ‘a microtab on wheels’ (p40), and Reiko’s sentimentality towards it is seen as peculiar. Flak, synonymous with ‘criticism’, therefore serves as a subtle critique and rebuttal of previous portrayals of robots that dehumanise ace people and is a novel way of using non-human characters to emphasise the humanity of others without once referring to asexuality, countering asexual denigration. This negative stereotype is instead turned on its head, as Kaleb uses comparisons to robots to call out the denial of ace individuals’ epistemic authority upon coming out: people ‘started to act like Flak faced with a computational error, and became desperate to correct the record to something they could comprehend’ (p114). The strong dislike of robots by Melina, Santiago, and Astros in general is also a comment on how SF has used robots to the detriment of such ace individuals—dislike of something so symbolic of asexual denigration is perhaps to be expected.

Despite being an object, I still treat Flak as a major character in the novella, offering a prologue and epilogue from its unique perspective. These segments clearly demonstrate its non-sapience and incomparability to my ace characters, and are short enough not to overshadow those characters. For much of the text, Flak is deliberately treated by both the narrative and the characters as an afterthought, while remaining present as a guiding thread for the novella. Its prologue and epilogue bookend the stories of the ace characters, allowing me to end the novella with satisfactory closure while keeping those individual stories open and unresolved, reflecting how the personal stories of young people are just commencing. The title *Accurate Data* refers to Flak's quest to make all data accurate, which drives the plot, but also alludes to a wider quest for more nuanced, diverse, and indeed accurate representations of ace lives in YA, SF, and wider media.

#### **Use of labels<sup>4</sup>**

A final consideration when exploring non-normative sexuality within SF is the question of whether to use labels such as 'ace' and 'asexual'. *Accurate Data's* future setting requires, as Pearson states, deliberation of 'epistemologies and terminologies as well as cultural practice' (2003b, p156), and the creation of any imagined society offers total freedom to choose whether, how, which, and to what extent labels are or are not used.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'label' to refer to such descriptors as 'asexual' or 'aromantic' in line with many prominent asexuality studies scholars, including Gupta, Mitchell and Hunnicutt, and Scherrer, as well as many ace individuals, as documented in various studies.

Queer theorists would take the stance that labels should not be used in future settings, as the project of queer theory is to trouble binary classifications until no classifications need remain. Butler argues that ‘the articulation of ever more specified identities’ should not be the aim of queer political activism (1993, p79), warning that ‘factionalised disputes over self-definition’ can be damaging to the cause (p168). She would likely take issue with the micro-identities beneath the ace umbrella, but I hold that any negative consequences of using and promoting the term ‘ace’ itself as an identity would be far lesser than the negative impacts on ace lives of continued silencing and ace erasure. Meanwhile, Foucault expresses concern that using labels enables the state persecution of individuals, and asks ‘when this whole thicket of disparate sexualities was labelled as if to disentangle them from one another, was the object to exclude them from reality?’ ([1976] 1998, p43). This persecution unevenly affects those with non-normative identities, since as Dering points out, ‘sexual essences’ are distributed so that, for example, ‘homosexuals are more essentially homosexual than heterosexuals are heterosexual’ (1992, p167). Gupta (2017) concedes that these are valid concerns, yet I argue that compulsory sexuality marginalises ace individuals and causes the denigration of non-sexuality without those individuals specifically identifying as or coming out as ace, and even if this is exacerbated by labelling, there is great value in combatting silencing and ace erasure. As Eric Anderson states, ‘only when heterosexuality is no longer presumed, can sexual minorities safely disregard sexual categorisation’ (2009, p33). Though he is speaking of homosexuality, compulsory sexuality and allonormativity mean that the same can be said of asexuality. I demonstrate this in my novella, where Kaleb uses labels in his allonormative society, but allosexuality is not presumed for Melina, so she has no need of them: ‘being an Astro covered everything that needed covering, for her’ (p65).

My choice to use the labels 'asexual' and 'aromantic' in *Accurate Data* was also based on sociological research that finds that these are useful to ace individuals in several ways. First, Stacy Anne Pinto states that 'although the idea of labelling can sometimes be restrictive, it can also be liberating' (2014, p341), and Mollet points out that labels and terminology help individuals to learn about asexuality, as otherwise 'they d[o] not have the language needed to search' for this validating information (2020, p198). Likewise, I show how Tex was only able to contextualise his negative relationship experience and explore the idea of asexuality after Kaleb gave him terms he could look up, while Tex's adoption of the label 'asexual' for himself coincides with his self-liberation from needing to either dedicate himself to a career or become a sexual being.

Second, AVEN states that these labels are useful in helping ace individuals 'communicate that part of themselves to others' (quoted in Catri 2021, p1531), and perhaps in time to eliminate the need for them to explain their identity as part of coming out, as Georgia must do in *Loveless*. Kaleb expresses his annoyance at having to explain his identity, and his ability to give Tex the words 'aromantic asexual' and tell him to 'look it up' (p46) places the burden on Tex rather than himself—without the existence of these words, this would not be possible. Later, Tex recognises the utility of labels in this manner, saying that it 'makes sense' and 'saves a lot of hassle' (p114), and so he is able to communicate his developing ace identity to Kaleb by simply using the word 'asexual'. Furthermore, Kaleb states that Stilbon doesn't 'like people describing themselves', and is 'the reason there isn't a word' (p46) for his relationship with Melina, which makes it difficult for them to communicate the nature of their

relationship to others, notably Tex. Kaleb notes that they are 'lucky to have the words [they] do have' (p46). Having been raised as Stilboni, Tex is not so lucky.

Labels are therefore key to Tex's development of an ace identity, which, like that of Georgia in *Loveless*, follows the pattern identified by Robbins et al and is influenced by the effects of compulsory sexuality. Until Kaleb offers him the 'asexual' label, Tex sees himself as a failure. His initial reaction is unsettlement and fear, as the compulsory sexuality in his native Stilboni culture means that he has no existing frame of reference or ability to rationalise Kaleb's revelation. Later, when talking to Melina, he has become aware that something about asexuality resonates with him, and still struggles to grasp what that is—a consequence of ace erasure and hermeneutical injustice. Only when Melina unwittingly connects his pursuit of a law career to his relationship with Adrian, and after Tex re-examines that relationship, does he feel that 'the undefinable something that Kaleb had catalysed' is definable, and 'appeared to have been lurking buried in [his] subconscious all along' (p80). At this point, talking with Melina and reconciling her thoughts on her relationship with Kaleb with what Kaleb revealed and Tex has observed about them gives Tex hope that a relationship may be possible for him, and he starts to think of being ace in a positive frame: 'that awful, wonderful something [...] he'd always known, but could not comprehend' (p81). All of this demonstrates how disseminating knowledge and understanding of these labels can combat hermeneutical injustice and silencing, and so positively reduce the impacts of compulsory sexuality on ace lives.

## Conclusion

*Accurate Data* goes beyond previous ace YA and SF texts that partly acknowledge and explore what it is to be an ace young person in a world with compulsory sexuality. It sets out three visions of the world, with compulsory sexuality, allonormativity, and even aronormativity, and asks how ace life may differ to positive and negative degrees within such environments. In doing so it may or may not contribute to a change of attitudes towards asexuality and allonormative values, provoke discontent, inspire reform, or simply help to combat asexual marginalisation, erasure, and denigration. Yet importantly, *Accurate Data* also recognises that its audience of contemporary ace teenagers do experience the impacts of compulsory sexuality it explores, and attempts to offer validation and empathy while encouraging questioning of accepted norms, and extolling the value of remaining true to oneself even if those norms make it challenging to do so.

The aims of this thesis have therefore been fulfilled. *Accurate Data* interrogates and exposes the regulatory system of compulsory sexuality via the cultures and societies of Stilbon and Yereen, and uses the perspectives of multiple ace characters to explore the variations of youth ace experience, and the impacts that compulsory sexuality and allonormativity can have on young ace lives. It also envisions a concept of a society without compulsory sexuality in that of the Astros, with aronormativity. To have envisioned and presented a society devoid of *any* (in)formal regulation of sexuality, even through norms rather than structures, may have been preferable from a research perspective, but the Astro society as presented does have value as an alternative to compulsory sexuality, and considerable utility for the exploration of asexuality within

this context, as I have demonstrated. An obvious springboard for further research would be the creation of a fictional society without compulsory sexuality, allonormativity, amatonormativity, aronormativity, or acenormativity, a difficult task for any writer unconsciously influenced by a culture of sexual norms and binaries. This would begin, at last, to answer Emens's call to expose and refute compulsory sexuality by 'imagin[ing] a mirror on our sexual world, replicating each of society's components, but without sexual attraction defining any of them' (2014, p344).

**Appendix 1: Table 1: Themes of asexuality and compulsory sexuality in ace YA and SF literature**

Full bibliographic information supplied in the bibliography below. ‘YA\*’ indicates children’s text classed as YA for the purposes of this research. ‘POV’ indicates protagonist from whose perspective part or all of the narrative is written; ‘+’ indicates multiple ace characters.

| Author           | Year of publication | Form / genre | Prominence of ace character(s) | Story | Identity | Coming out | Love | Acephobia |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|-------|----------|------------|------|-----------|
| Chambers, B      | 2019                | SF           | Main                           |       |          |            |      |           |
| Clare, C; Chu, W | 2019                | YA           | Minor                          |       |          |            |      |           |
| Gray, C          | 2021                | YA SF        | Secondary                      |       |          |            |      |           |
| Healey, K        | 2010                | YA           | Secondary                      |       |          |            |      |           |
| Hernandez, C     | 2019                | YA* SF       | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Hernandez, C     | 2020                | YA* SF       | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Ireland, J       | 2018                | YA SF        | Main                           |       |          |            |      |           |
| Kaczynski, H     | 2017                | YA SF        | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Kann, C          | 2018                | YA           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Keplinger, K     | 2018                | YA           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Lee, M           | 2020                | YA           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Lee, Y H         | 2017                | SF           | Secondary                      |       |          |            |      |           |
| Magruder, N      | 2018                | YA           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Newman, E        | 2019                | SF           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Ormsbee, K       | 2017                | YA           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Oseman, A        | 2017                | YA           | Main                           |       |          |            |      |           |
| Oseman, A        | 2020                | YA           | POV +                          |       |          |            |      |           |
| Pohl, L          | 2019                | YA SF        | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Pratt, T         | 2017                | SF           | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Rogerson, M      | 2019                | YA           | Secondary +                    |       |          |            |      |           |
| Skrutskie, E     | 2018                | YA SF        | POV                            |       |          |            |      |           |
| Solomon, R       | 2017                | SF           | Secondary                      |       |          |            |      |           |
| Thor, R          | 2019                | YA SF        | Main                           |       |          |            |      |           |
| Wake, E          | 2018                | YA           | Minor                          |       |          |            |      |           |

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